

*Latina survives brutal attacks,
transcends to spiritual triumph
through love.*

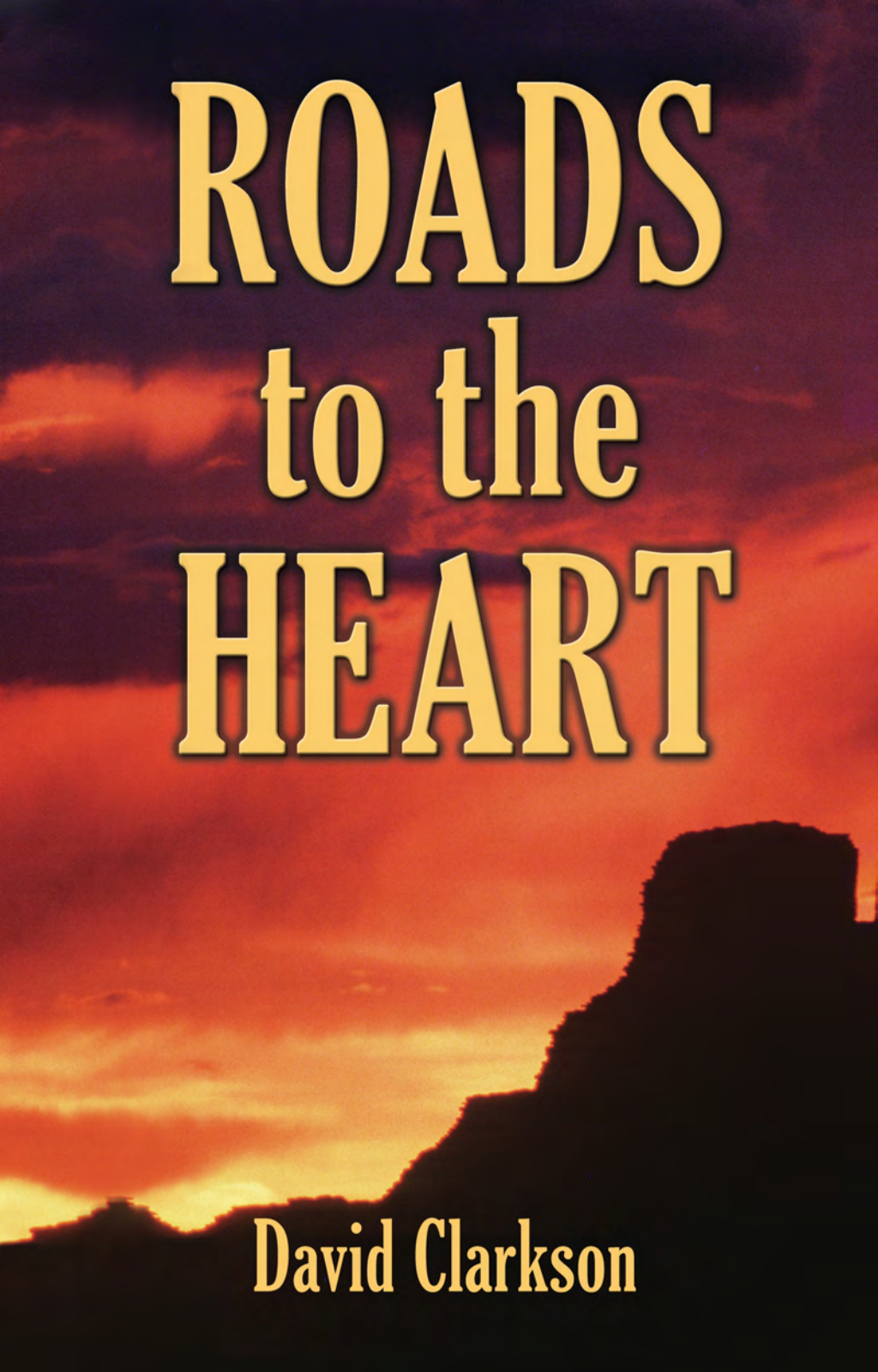
ROADS TO THE HEART

By David Clarkson

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Chapter 1: La Matanza (Narrator: Fionna Crisanto)

Danger for me on that December night began with a human shadow, followed by a hesitant footstep. As a girl of sixteen, disheartened by the hog killing but trusting the men who had joined in the ritual, I felt safe when I strayed from the festivities. Yet vivid images of dripping blood troubled me as I turned.

“You spooked me, Harley,” I blurted, trembling with relief. Had the man been Anselmo Rodarte, Papá’s sneaky foreman, I would be retreating in fright and disgust, but that *malvado* was taking time off in Santa Fe, drinking tequila on the Farolito Walk that lines Canyon Road and Acequia Madre.

“Takin’ a break from all them doin’s, Fionna?” Harley Fewtrell twanged, fracturing my name. He was a pool rider, a cowboy who tends cattle for several ranchers on their joint summer ranges and hangs around as a *waddie* through other seasons. His voice sounded lower-pitched from the jittery tone when, hours ago, fancying himself a poet, he had read me one of his lackluster rhymes, which I praised to cheer him.

“No appetite,” I explained. “Payaso was *mi favorito*. I raised him from a piglet.”

He stood motionless, his Bailey Tombstone hat beneath the New Mexico moonlight shading his windburned, goateed face. “Git over it, Fionna. They *all* spurt blood. It’s *natural*.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” I should have bitten my tongue, but it was like receiving a forwarded e-mail for the umpteenth time when you’re hoping for something original from the sender. “And my name is pronounced *fee-OH-nuh*. Can’t you *ever* get it right?”

He glanced back up the rocky descent, reeling slightly, checking the silhouettes around the fire. Then he turned toward me, grinning coolly. “No need to scald my eardrums. How come you moseyed off all alone on this *bajada*, anyhow?”

I sighed and, despite my growing pique, shined my Mini Maglite on a small tree outlined in the midnight-blue distance. “*Manzanita*,” I

said. "Papá might cut a few branches to decorate our fireplace mantel. The berries look..."

"Red as blood, I'd reckon." Leaning upslope at a rangy six-two, and wreathed by Orion drawing his bow, he loomed over me darkly.

Buttinsky! I thought, bristling at his twisted analogy. My own height had peaked a year ago at a half inch under five-three. *Well, good things come in small...why's he stuck on blood?* I turned off the flashlight and pocketed it in my fleece-lined jacket.

He puffed a wisp of vapor, lightly stamping his boots to increase circulation to his toes. "I've heard they make good jelly."

"Before they ripen," I said, lightened by the shift in subject. "I made some last Christmas. After they're washed, you crush them and add the peel of a half lemon, and a cinnamon stick, and simmer them for fifteen minutes. Then you strain them through cheesecloth, and bring the juice to a boil, and add four cups of sugar, and..."

"Your throat looks slab-marble white in this quicksilver moon, Fionna. How come you're so fair-complexed?"

I shrugged self-consciously from the pearly radiance, focused on *white*, ignoring *throat*. For Harley it would be a waste of my breath to explain that my mother, whom Papá had married in El Paso, was descended from a Spanish *chela*, meaning blonde. That's what I had always been told. "Such a sky, Harley. The stars look like diamonds on a cloak of black velvet. Imagine—city folks have never seen the Milky Way. You should write a poem about this spectacle."

"I ain't in a po'try mood," he said, moving closer, boots grinding on loosened shale. Looking over his shoulder again, alcohol tainting his breath, he added tersely, "It's been a good day for bloodlettin'."

The *matanza de marrano* we were observing is a ritual in which a hog is killed. It takes place on a winter day when the hog is free from pests. A fiesta usually follows. Two weeks prior to the event the hog is fattened on corn. During the last forty-eight hours it is given only water to cleanse its innards. My family plus two others, along with respective crew members, had started the task at dawn. After the hog was killed, nearly always with a rifle owned by my father, Maclovio Crisanto—though in the past this step took place with a hammer blow between the eyes—the animal was hoisted for the *morcilla*, in which a

vein in the neck is slashed, allowing drainage of the blood into a pan for making blood pudding. That job was given to Harley this time, for testing his bingo prize, a new Fox River knife.

I had not wished to attend this slaughter, but Papá in his gently terse diction had been insistent. “*Tienes que ir tú, mi hija querida*. You have to go, my dear daughter. I cannot allow you to remain here unprotected. Someday you shall own this storied ranch, along with Anselmo and your brother. Do not project weakness for so natural a thing as butchering an animal that was raised for a singular purpose.”

At his mention of Anselmo I had resisted saying that I would forego every acre before sharing my life with that *puto*.

After Payaso’s carcass was bled, men cut it down and covered the back with burlap sacks. Then scalding water, heated in metal *jarras* formerly made of baked clay, was poured on the bristly hide to soften and loosen it; and bell-shaped peelers we called *peladores* were used for scraping the skin. Some ranchers employ a *chamuscadora* (weed burner) for this process, thus saving time and keeping themselves dry, but my father prefers the old-fashioned method. Next, slices of fatback we called *lonjas* were cut and sectioned into cubes. This step lasted all through the morning, the men placing the pork in *jarras* of *manteca* (lard) for cooking over a fire. The crispy, browned meat, called *chicharrones*, was wrapped with red chile in a heated tortilla when ready. Other dishes included *carnitas*, *menudo*, and *posole*, served with soft drinks, beer, and chokecherry wine.

“Please, enough about blood,” I pleaded, shuddering at the sight of the sheathed knife under his open jacket. “You’ll make me gag.”

“For a ranch gal, you’re mighty pampered,” he quipped. “There’s been talk that you’re *bad* behind Maclovio’s back.” He watched me askance. “I’ve heard you have a hard time keepin’ your britches on.”

I sighed, not surprised. Sure, I’ve been naughty, but “bad” seems unfair. It’s true I showed three Anglo boys my *concha* under a bridge, and my *compinche* Nayeli nearly got me to strip naked (“sexting”) on Facebook. I chickened out, though, fearing discovery and shame. My father, while strict, showers me with material things, but my resentful mother cares more for her souvenir swizzle sticks than for my success in school. Boys have caused so much trouble that Papá forbade me to

mix with them. No matter, for despite their attention I've guarded my virtue. Men, except Anselmo, generally treat me better, and I'll turn seventeen next April. In the dozen years I've known Harley, he has impressed me as a gentle drifter for whom I sometimes feel sorry.

Papá has been my lodestar. Long ago he excelled in *la corrida de gallos*, a horse race in which a live rooster is buried with only its head poking out. At the crack of a gunshot men on horseback ran to snatch the bird and take it to the finish line. Papá on his mighty Durango was the perennial winner. He takes pride in my "inherited" motivation.

"It's a puredee gospel fact you ain't bashful," Harley continued, "showin' off them turnip-size hooters. Just can't help bustin' 'em out. Well, I reckon if a gal's set on not mindin'..."

"You're guessing," I objected, a giggle betraying me, for this was nothing new. "I've been guilty of mischievous stunts, but my *virtue* rates five stars."

(While modesty was observed at home, sometimes my rebellious spirit made me a carefree exception. Papá dictated that I wear nothing less than a bath towel after showering, but Mamá, out of spite for his austerity, had become passive toward my habit of "semi" *au naturel*. Two Saturdays ago, somewhere beyond the skiers and tourists east of Angel Fire, I was shucking my hooded parka amidst patches of snow when Papá, using my cell phone, snapped a picture that missed, for I, falling backward, had plunged into Cieneguilla Creek. Wading to the bank, laughing, shivering, I threw off every piece of my soaked duds and, on impulse, paddled out to a rock and turned, standing, the water swirling inches below my bellybutton, snowflakes kissing my boobs like aspen fluff. "*¡Por favor!*" I urged, and again Papá aimed the lens. On our return *viaje* south, the truck scattering flocks of ruby-crowned kinglets and pine siskins, I sat between my parents in a wraparound *ruana*, the fleece shawl sliding to my waist when I wiped the fogging windshield, my mother too soused on cherry brandy to chastise me. I had filed the image as "Snow Maiden," but hesitated to print it.)

Harley grinned wryly, rubbing his chin whiskers. "Guess I nicked a nerve, huh? That jiggly, compact body, and poked-out candy tarts, has got Maclovio's men downright *inspired*."

I wanted to shut the gate on this gab. "So? At least nobody finds me *boring*. Better that I show myself off than to be thought of as shy. Besides, Papá hires *gentlemen*, not counting that awful Anselmo!"

"Tyrannosaurus Mex? It's *him* you've got plumb amorous."

"It's all in his sleazy mind. That's *another* unpleasant subject."

I thought back to our earlier conversation, when I was enabled to escape Papá's vigilant eye. Harley had watched me play basketball the previous night, but had little enthusiasm for the game. As a point guard who rarely shot the ball, with fluid accuracy in three-pointers and free throws, plus the occasional back-door layup, I was averaging only twelve points. It was my combined seventeen assists and steals per game that got me tagged with "Water Bug" while attracting college scouts, but because of my size I only half expected to play after high school. A cinch to be my class's valedictorian, thanks to Papá's encouragement, I would likely garner an academic scholarship.

"You're sharp on the varnished hardwood, Water Bug," Harley had commented with a chuckle, "but even better at book-learnin'."

"My mission is Albuquerque," I had confided, "though Papá has the bankroll to put me in any private school he wishes. *Say*, could I hear that new poem about me?"

I was attempting to sidetrack him from asking to hear my "Seeing Latina," a vignette describing objects that have arched shapes. "Like a banana or a taco shell," I explained, making it simple. "Or the body of a guitar. A butterfly's folded wings. The brim of a sombrero."

"Gooseneck," he drawled, surprising me.

Then from memory I recited, "Sunrise edging the horizon like an archer's bow. The sweep of a western saddle's cantle. A pineapple slice accenting a tropical drink. The curvature of a girl's thigh in denim cutoffs. A Jolly Rancher sucker..." Playfully I blurted, "What candy would *you* like to lick, Harley?"

He worked his jaw, weighing the question.

"*Oops!*" I whispered to my imaginary friend, Felina, on whose impish cheeks I had painted Halloween cat whiskers in a dream. *No wonder Mamá labels me a flirt!*

But if Harley had caught my innuendo he only flashed a poker face while pulling a folded paper from his hatband. A corny line from

his reading, "She sashays with a shimmy that'd knock the horsehead off a pumpjack," was flattering but disappointing.

Called to help the women, I worried whether my parting smirk was taken as a put-down. As I drained soaked hominy for *posole*, I saw him speak to Mamá—or had I imagined it?

Now, my nerves on edge, I rubbed my new amulet, a turquoise ring, and glanced at the distant light of two Coleman lanterns, where *música*, a *corrido* that featured Papá's accordion and various singers, wailed like a requiem. My brother Seferino, home for Christmas after a tour of duty with the Army in Iraq, played one of the band's guitars.

"I figgered you'd be up there," Harley was saying now, hooking a thumb at the music. "You handle an ax good as Sue Foley. What tune was you practicin' at Agapito's chuck wagon last Sunday?"

"Alex de Grassi's 'Prelude.' I can't get the effect of sounding like two guitars in unison." His presence seemed to immobilize me. The only motion was in a cloud that was covering the moon. "I came here for fresh air, feeling nauseated," I resumed. "I wish you wouldn't call my instrument an ax."

He wiped a leering quirk off his lips. "Okay...GIT-tar. Talkin' at me with all that razzmatazz. What made you sickly, anyhow?"

"Like I said, the *blood*. Can't you just *drop* it?"

His shoulders jerked slightly. "You oughta get used to it."

Suddenly I realized that Harley, shifting sideways, was blocking my path back to the gathering. My pulse quickening, I turned away, distracted by a black-tailed jackrabbit bounding to a stand of juniper. As if cued by the animal I plotted an escape, thinking that if Harley came any closer I could outrun him, for basketball had strengthened my legs for speed.

Too late! When I faced him again, he slapped my left jaw so hard that I was knocked to the frozen ground; and as I rolled over, raising up to run, he viciously cuffed the other side of my face.

"Teasin' meskin bitch!" he snarled. "Pokin' fun at my po'try!"

This can't be happening, I thought, too shaken to yell for Papá. In the next instant I felt my teeth loosen from a punch that smashed my lips. He led me into a rugged draw, half dragging me, one hand covering my mouth, the other fondling my breasts. After gagging me

with his red bandanna he pinned me facedown, pulled off my jacket, and bound my wrists behind me with rawhide. Then he hitched up my flannel shirt and began working me over. “Little hip-shakin’ flirt, laughin’ at my verses.”

I’m not going to sugarcoat what happened in the next harrowing moments. While the evil that defines unnatural acts extends beyond anything most people undergo, it pervades the hearts of some men like a poison. We read about it in newspapers one day and, shrugging it off, forget it the next, having thought: *Such perversity can’t happen to me*. After it *does*, a victim may never again draw the line between suspicion and trust. Yet the greater gamble is *complacency*. What I must describe next won’t be pretty.

His fists pounded away at my ribs and back, moving up and down my battered torso. Rolling me over and unzipping my jeans, he lifted me in a prone position on a cedar log amid a bed of *nopal* and ripped off my panties. “There oughta be *more* blood when I git done reamin’ your ass,” he wheezed. “That’s what needs bustin’ first. Then I’ll pop your prissy cherry ’til them bouncy thighs drip crimson.” He paused, diverted by the swoop of a spotted owl. “Or maybe I oughta skip both and git down to the business of slashin’ that pretty white throat.”

The faint sound of my brother trying to croon like the late Freddy Fender intensified my awareness of the distance I had stumbled from safety. I choked in shock, cactus needles piercing my inflamed knees. This couldn’t be Harley, but a demon possessed. Finding my Maglite, he straddled the log behind me and, as I saw over my shoulder, shined the beam on the areas he intended to violate. “Your wazoo’s tiny as a chigger bite, Fionna. Good thing I brung a chunk of fatback to grease my rocket.” He slid forward, working his palms beneath my pelvis.

In my pain I twisted and writhed, trying to break his cruel grasp. As the hectic seconds passed I sensed through ringing ears that the music had stopped. Footsteps thumped downhill in our direction!

Harley dipped his slickened fingers into a cracked *tinaja*, wiped them on his jeans, and parted my bared bottom. “You’re gittin’ *plowed*,” he grunted, unaware of two oncoming figures. “Splittin’ your saucy behind is my bonus in this deal.” He pulled back my head by

coiling my long black hair. His breath shrouded me in steam as he bent above me. My *safe* world spun chaotically, flashing like a disco globe.

Bonus? Deal? Payback for trying to be nice?

And then his broad shoulders were yanked backwards.

Hours later, awakening from a concussion with cracked ribs and multiple contusions, my knees oozing with the puncture wounds of cactus spines while a dentist checked my loosened teeth, I begged to be told the outcome, but Papá, squeezing my hand, was too shaken to comply. Before returning to school, I learned the horrible details.

Seferino, reaching Harley first, was knifed to death. The dripping blade was inches from my carotid artery when Papá's shot shattered my attacker's collarbone. In time, spared from testifying in court, I learned that Harley had received a life sentence for murder, attempted murder, and rape, the last-mentioned specified as attempted sodomy of a teen-ager due to undisclosed circumstances.

As the effects of the painkillers wore off and my injuries healed, a fog of confusion remained. The trauma was expected, but I couldn't connect my nightmares to the attack. Haunting images of *alfeñiques*, figures that, made of sugar and colored icing depicting human skulls, were traceable to a trip I had made with Mamá to Santa Fe in early November, on a day celebrated in Mexico as *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead).

Yet recurring impressions of red leaves whirling in candlelight were tormenting by comparison, since the *unknown* is always more frightening. Or did they symbolize the collapse of my teammates?

Our basketball season had started with fourteen wins, the single defeat coming on a buzzer-beater that we later avenged on our home court with a convincing twenty-point blowout. But as I lay recovering from Harley's assault, the magic ended; we were trounced in the first round of the playoffs. Even so, it was heartening when my teammates and coach visited me at the hospital and dispelled my sense of having betrayed them. If only the good feelings had lasted!

Those whirling red leaves, the flickering candle. I finally decided to label this vision a *farolito*, a paper lantern consisting of a candle held in place by sand in a paper sack.

Meanwhile my mother had seized every opportunity to blame my *coquetería* (flirting) for the death of my brother. Papá, renowned as a marksman, warned that if I involved myself with such an *hombre* in the future, he would not hesitate to kill him.

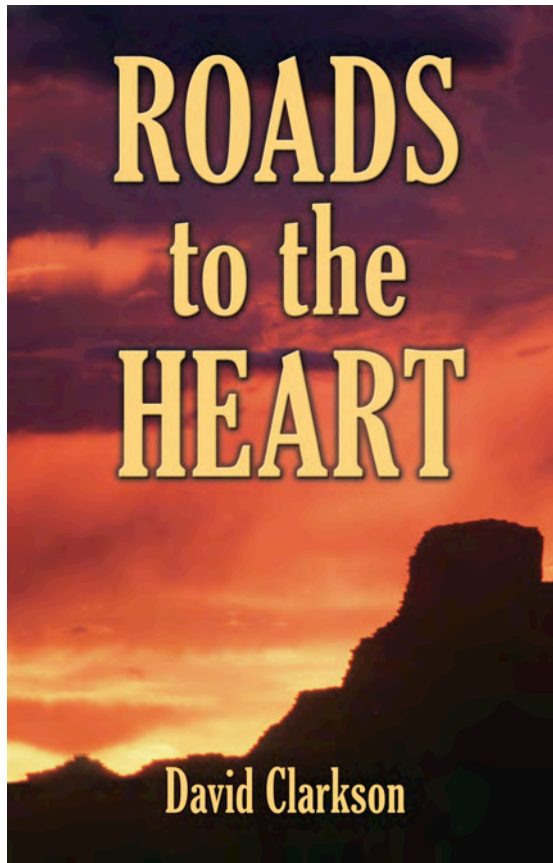
For every contention that Papá is a violent man, I find his actions forgivable. I remain to him a dutiful daughter. Regarding my mother, Clotilde, I hold a different view. Here are three reasons why.

First, between my dismissal from the hospital and my enrollment in college, she handed me a horrid bit of advice. It greatly confused me, leaving my outlook in disarray.

Second, concerning my birth, she eventually set off a bombshell. As if the attack on that December night were not degrading enough, her confession splintered my heart in a thousand jagged pieces.

Third, half blind after my rescue, I heard someone shout, “Harley stabbed one of Maclovio’s kids to death.”

And following like a flaming arrow came my mother’s imploring scream: “¡Ay, Dios! Please let it be Fionna!”



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