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Orphaned at birth, Eliza Sommers is raised in the British colony of Valparaíso, Chile, by the well-intentioned Victorian spinster Miss Rose and her more rigid brother Jeremy. Just as she meets and falls in love with the wildly inappropriate Joaquín Andieta, a lowly clerk who works for Jeremy, gold is discovered in the hills of northern California. By 1849, Chileans of every stripe have fallen prey to feverish dreams of wealth. Joaquín takes off for San Francisco to seek his fortune, and Eliza, pregnant with his child, decides to follow him. As we follow her spirited heroine on a perilous journey north in the hold of a ship to the rough-and-tumble world of San Francisco and northern California, we enter a world whose newly arrived inhabitants are driven mad by gold fever. A society of single men and prostitutes among whom Eliza moves--with the help of her good friend and savior, the Chinese doctor Tao Chien--California opens the door to a new life of freedom and independence for the young Chilean. Her search for the elusive Joaquín gradually turns into another kind of journey that transforms her over time, and what began as a search for love ends up as the conquest of personal freedom.



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