

A person wearing a cowboy hat, a plaid shirt, and a large silver belt buckle is holding a golden handgun. The background is a dark blue gradient.

USA TODAY Bestselling Author

ANN MAJOR

THE GIRL
— with the —
GOLDEN
GUN

“Ann Major’s name on the cover instantly identifies the book as a good read.”—*New York Times* bestselling author Sandra Brown

Ann Major

The Girl with the Golden Gun

«HarperCollins»

Major A.

The Girl with the Golden Gun / A. Major — «HarperCollins»,

Following a tragic plane crash, no one believed that Golden Spurs ranch heiress Mia Kemble could have survived. And no one is more surprised to find out she's been languishing in a Mexican prison than loner cowboy Shanghai Knight, Mia's former lover. Shanghai has fought hard to put the past behind him, and has finally become as successful as the stuck-up Kembles. So why can't he forget Mia, or their one night of passion? Suddenly Shanghai knows he needs a plan. When Shanghai arrives to save the day, Mia can't help but wonder if the wild man from her past, the man who broke her heart, has finally been tamed. Or whether he would have come if he knew the truth behind her baby's paternity. But she's still in jeopardy—now more than ever. And Shanghai may be the only one who can help. It isn't over between them. Not even close.

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“You think I’m trash now, don’t you?”

Her directness rendered him speechless.

“I didn’t sleep with Tavio,” she whispered, frantic for him to believe her.

“I don’t care!”

“Okay. I don’t know why I bothered to defend myself—to you, of all people.”

She hated him for being able to compel her just by sitting across from her. “I hate you,” she whispered in a low, seething tone. Then she instantly regretted saying anything.

“Good.” He flashed her a ruthless white grin. “I wish to hell you’d figured that out before you seduced me and got yourself pregnant! Because now—for better or worse—we’re stuck with each other!”

“You can leave, for all I care! I don’t ever want anything from you again,” she said.

“You want out of here, don’t you?”

He took her silence to mean yes.

“You’re not calling the shots anymore, darlin’. I am. Listen, because I’m only going to say this once. You have to do exactly what I say. Exactly. Your life and mine depend on it.”

Also by ANN MAJOR

THE GIRL WITH THE GOLDEN SPURS
THE HOT LADIES MURDER CLUB
MARRY A MAN WHO WILL DANCE
WILD ENOUGH FOR WILLA
INSEPARABLE

The Girl with the Golden Gun

Ann Major

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Nobody has time to write!

So many people support me in big and little ways so that I can get a few words down on paper.

Professionally, I want to thank Tara Gavin, Karen Solem, Nancy Berland and all the talented people they work with. I want to thank everybody at MIRA. I want to thank fans, especially those who have taken the time to send me encouraging letters.

Personally, I thank Ted and my mother, who go without things they need too often, so that I can get the work done. My children and grandchildren are wonderful, too. I must also thank all my friends, who understand when I forget to return their phone calls.

I dedicate this book in loving memory to Sondra Stanford.

Smart Cowboy Saying:

When you lose, don't lose the lesson.

—From “Cowboy Quotes, Sayings and Wisdom”

www.Cowboyway.com

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Prologue

Black Oaks Ranch
South Texas

“When I’m through with you, you’ll have nothing and be nothin’, boy! Mia will finally see what a lowlife you are!”

Rain slashed the windshield so hard Shanghai Knight could barely see to drive. He speeded up anyway, slamming his foot down on the gas pedal with such a vengeance his truck weaved recklessly through the slippery mud.

He couldn’t get away from the Golden Spurs Ranch fast enough. Damn. He was such an idiot!

As if to knock some sense into himself, he hit his brow with the bottom edge of his fist. He’d give anything if Caesar Kemble’s taunts would stop repeating themselves inside his head like a broken record.

When he rubbed his right cheek and jaw, he only aggravated the painful bruise that Caesar had caused when he punched him, so Shanghai clamped both hands back on the steering wheel. It galled him to remember what quick work Caesar had made of him in front of Mia.

A few punches in the ribs and a few more below the belt, and all the fight had been knocked clean out of him long before Caesar’s men had picked him up and shoved him down the ranch house steps into the mud.

Every time he thought about Caesar standing over him in his dining room with his fists raised and that nasty grin on his face, Shanghai wanted to wheel around and go back. Looking prettier than a picture, Mia had knelt beside Shanghai stroking his face. How he’d hated her, of all people, for being a witness to his humiliation.

The wealthy Kembles despised the lowly Knights, and the Knights held an ancient grudge against the Kembles for stealing their ranch. Shanghai and Mia never should have become involved with each other.

They wouldn’t have if Caesar hadn’t damn near backed over her at Old Man Pimbley’s gas station when she’d been two. Shanghai had been twelve at the time and sneaking a smoke out back. At the risk of his own neck, not that he’d ever been one to mind that much, he’d thrown his smoke down and run screaming toward the truck. Not that Caesar had noticed. When he’d kept on backing, Shanghai had dived behind the truck and thrown her to safety. One of the big back tires had broken his leg.

When his cigarette butt had started a grass fire out back, Caesar and Old Man Pimbley had cussed him out for his trouble although Caesar had relented and paid to get his leg set. But the local gossips had made Shanghai into something of a hero, which had truly galled Caesar.

As Mia grew up she’d heard the story, and like the gossips, seen him as a hero, too. Thus, she’d developed a bad habit of following him around, her whiskey-colored eyes sparkling with adoration. He’d liked somebody admiring him, especially since it had rankled Caesar so much, until he’d started chasing girls his own age. Then her habit had gotten annoying since she was always watching him at the damndest times.

Once when he’d been dating two girls at the same time, she’d called them both and told each one about the other. Mia knew how to make trouble, all right.

What did she think of him now?

Hell, why should he care?

Not many people admired the Knights much anymore. The Kembles were everything in Spur County—mainly ’cause they’d stolen from the Knights. Shanghai had grown up poor while Mia had been a princess from birth. If he worked for the rest of his life he’d never be able to earn a fraction of her wealth.

Everything about tonight was pure, raw hell. The weather was wild and wet, the road bad and Shanghai was breathing hard and driving way too fast. He'd made a fool out of himself, and tomorrow after Mia and Caesar got through bragging to all their friends, everybody in three counties would know.

If he had a fault, it was pride. He didn't like feeling like he was nothing. He realized now that it was too late, that maybe he shouldn't have gone alone to Caesar Kemble for a showdown on Kemble's vast Golden Spurs spread.

Suddenly up ahead Shanghai saw the dark, familiar outline of the small, hunting cabin where he'd spent many a night when his daddy was drunk or just plain too mean to live with. Shanghai stomped on the brakes, causing the big old truck to skid on its bald tires. It hurtled through the mud and rain at a frightening speed and slammed into the bottom step that led up to the porch.

Wood splintered. Cursing silently, he cut the engine. He didn't know what to do.

If he went home, his daddy might be drunk. If his old man saw his face, he'd figure out what had happened. Whether Shanghai confessed or not, his daddy would most likely start a fight. Caesar was going to do what he was going to do.

He grabbed the steering wheel and laid his dark brow on it, remembering how filled with pride he'd been when he'd boldly slapped those documents that proved his ancestors had as much right as Caesar's to the Golden Spurs Ranch onto Caesar Kemble's massive dining-room table in front of Caesar and his foreman, Kinky. He'd eyed the men cockily, feeling full of himself. Rubbing his brow, Kinky had frowned.

Caesar hadn't even bothered to read a single page. He'd said simply, "This don't mean nothin'! Hell, you're nothin', kid." Then he'd punched him in the jaw and knocked him out cold.

A girl's screams had startled him back to consciousness. He'd been sprawled flat on his back under the table when he'd felt little bits of shredded papers raining down on him and the tenderness of soft cool fingers brushing his face.

He'd said, "Ouch!"

Then she'd been yanked away by her father.

"Mia! I'll tan you, too, if you don't get back upstairs with Lizzy where you belong!" Caesar had yelled at her.

"You'd better not kill him!" she'd whispered fiercely, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I don't need your help, little girl. I'll be just fine!" Shanghai had muttered, feeling shamed by her tenderness but most of all by the fact that she'd seen his sorry ass sprawled on her floor.

"Fine? That's why you're lying there flat on your backside all busted up?"

Her words had hit a nerve. He prided himself on being tough.

He'd stared at her through slitted lashes, pretending to ignore her 'cause Mia hated being ignored more than she hated anything. Even so, he saw the redheaded teenager place her hands on her hips as she hovered over him like a guardian angel. Tonight she'd worn skintight jeans, a T-shirt and red boots. When she'd sprinted back up the stairs, he'd noticed that she filled out her jeans and T-shirt with a woman's shape now.

She was too young to look so grown-up. Mia had exasperated and charmed him for years by chasing him anytime she got the chance. He would have felt easier with the bean-pole shape, freckle-faced kid that she used to be.

Mia had made a habit of disappearing from the Golden Spurs Ranch for long stretches and wandering about the county on horseback. Anytime she'd gotten hurt, she'd come crying to Shanghai. Anytime she'd made a good grade or had won a prize at school, she'd had to tell him first even if it meant riding over to Black Oaks.

Once when her daddy had told her he was going to shoot a torn-up mongrel sheepdog she'd found bleeding to death on the highway, she'd carted the pup to Shanghai in her red wagon.

He'd told her her daddy was right for once, and it would be a kindness to shoot him. But when she'd left the mutt and her wagon, the beast had given him a baleful stare. Shanghai had taken the dog to the vet and nursed it back to health. He still remembered how her eyes had shone, when she'd come back for her wagon a month later and had seen the black-and-white mutt napping on his front porch.

"Don't you dare tell anybody I saved him," he'd warned her. "They'd think I was plum crazy."

"Cross my heart." She'd hesitated. "What do you call him?"

"Dog."

She'd knelt and petted the animal. "Can I name him?"

"What's wrong with Dog?"

"I—I'd call him Spot."

"That's as bad as Dog."

"Not quite, is it, Spot?"

Spot had wagged his tail fit to be tied, and it was Spot from then on.

Shanghai put the memories of her childhood aside. She was a Kemble and all grown-up now.

No sooner had her door slammed upstairs tonight than Caesar had resumed tearing up the documents. Then he'd started pounding the table. Shanghai had found himself staring up at the underside of the table where the name, Mia, was scrawled dozens of times in bright red crayon alongside Lizzy's name, and he'd imagined Mia a cute kid with red pigtails under the table up to mischief with her sister.

Then Caesar had distracted him by raking the last of the ruined documents he'd brought onto the floor beside Shanghai and shouting they were garbage just like he was.

"Get out, you lowdown, lying thief. You aren't a damn bit better than your daddy. And we all know what he is—a lousy, no-good drunk. But at least he knows that he lives under my protection, which is more than I can say for you. You think you're somethin'! Well, you're nothin'! When I tell him what you tried to do tonight in my house, in front of my little girl...you'll be lucky if he ever lets you set foot in his place again. He owes me. And so do you. So does this whole damn community. You Knights don't have any friends around here unless I allow it. Don't you ever forget it. Without me—you're nothin', boy. Nothin'!"

Suddenly Caesar's red face had changed. "You've given me an idea, boy. A helluvan idea. A real winner. I know how I'll get rid of all you Knights, once and for all." He'd gone to a small cabinet, opened a drawer and pulled out a couple of fresh decks of cards. "I'll hunt up that daddy of yours, and we'll have us a friendly, little game of poker. That's what we'll do. We'll have a few drinks. Then I'll tell him what you did here tonight."

"No...."

Caesar had laughed at him.

Shanghai despised himself because in the next breath he'd begged and apologized.

"Please—I'm sorry. Please—leave him alone!"

Caesar had guffawed again. "Everybody in three counties knows that cards and liquor are a fatal combination for your old man, boy. Kinky! Eli! Get him out of here!" Caesar turned back to Shanghai. "When I'm through with you, you'll have nothing and be nothin', boy! Mia will finally see you for the lowlife you are!"

"Don't you go near my daddy!"

When Shanghai had fought Eli and Kinky, Caesar had called for more cowboys. It had taken five of the bastards to fling Shanghai down the stairs into the rain.

When Shanghai had pulled himself to his feet, the last thing he'd seen was pretty Mia Kemble leaning out of her upstairs window. When he'd looked up, she'd thrown something down to him and then banged her window shut.

Pretending not to give a damn about her, he'd rammed his dripping Stetson with his lucky turkey feather on his head even harder than she'd slammed her window. Curious, he'd picked up the object she'd thrown. When he'd realized it was a red rose, he'd pitched it back into the mud.

Now that he was at his hunting cabin, Shanghai dreaded his daddy finding out that he'd gotten in a fight with Caesar. He might never let Shanghai go home again. His father didn't care if the Kembles had robbed the Knights of practically all their land. He just wanted to drink and gamble. Caesar kept offering to buy their last fifty thousand acres and his father kept refusing to sell, mainly because he and Cole begged him not to. The land was Shanghai's heritage, Cole's, too; part of their souls.

No use thinking about it. Shanghai knew he'd started something tonight that couldn't be stopped.

As he got out of his truck, he stood in the rain for a moment to inspect the mangled bottom step he'd just smashed. Damn.

He sprang to the second step, which was still sound, just as the sky flashed livid white fire and then went black again. Every timber of the tiny hunting cabin shook when thunder exploded again.

He threw open the front door, ripped off his wet, Western shirt and hung it on the back of a tattered leather chair where it dripped water onto the scarred oak floor. Then he went to the fridge and grabbed a couple of beers. He downed the first beer and paced restlessly.

He was twenty-four. What the hell was he going to do with the rest of his life? Cowboying and rodeoing were all he really liked to do. Not that he could stay here when there was no future at Black Oaks. At least not in the business of cows and calves and horses. Livestock prices had collapsed too many times, and Daddy had borrowed way too much money. There was only his kid brother, Cole, to consider.

Hell, Cole was twenty-one, which meant he was all grownup...even if he was still in college. It was time for Cole to be on his own.

Shanghai didn't want to leave his home, but he hadn't liked feeling like nothing on Caesar's floor with Mia watching. If he stayed here, he'd be nothin' all his life.

He sank wearily into the leather chair near the open window. The only thing he'd ever done to make money besides working Black Oaks was rodeoing. He was good at bronc ridin' and bull riding. When he donned buckskin chaps with silver conchos, pointed cowboy boots with spurs and his Stetson, people cheered and screamed and then patted him on the back when he rode well. They went wild when he won. Pretty women threw themselves at him.

He was too tall and powerfully built for the sport, and he'd have to be damn good—the best ever—to make it really pay. Good or bad, you could get yourself stomped or gored to death in front of thousands. Champions died of injuries as small as a broken rib nicking an artery.

What choice did he have?

Hell, he'd been beaten up all his life, hadn't he? A man could become famous riding bulls, as famous as any Kemble, at least for a spell.

Nobody wrote country songs about lawyers or doctors, did they? He reckoned he could take about as much pain as any man.

His black brows slashed together as he watched the rain hammer the earth. Caesar had destroyed the sheaves of old journals and ancient bank documents he'd slung on the table—all the evidence he'd been gathering for nearly two years to prove that his family, the Knights, had as much right to the Golden Spurs Ranch and its staggering mineral riches as the Kembles did.

What should he do next?

A bolt of lightning crashed again. Shanghai's heart beat faster. He rubbed his sore jaw. After his quarrel with Caesar Kemble, the storm more than matched his mood. Since Caesar had refused to even talk about making a fair settlement, maybe he should think about finding a real lawyer. But he couldn't go to a lawyer until he reassembled at least some of the evidence Caesar had destroyed. Besides lawyers cost money.

Even though it was so obvious the Knights had been swindled, his father had told him not to fight the Kembles.

His father could go to hell. Most people probably saw his daddy as an easygoing, shiftless soul, who had a weakness for the bottle. But they didn't know. His old man could get really drunk, and when he did, he always went after Shanghai.

There was no talking to him then, no arguing with a drunk.

The lights in his kitchen flickered twice. Shanghai wouldn't have minded the thunderstorm if he'd been in a better frame of mind. Water was scarce in south Texas.

He was stretching his long legs out when he heard a car door slam and quick, light footsteps followed by a timid knock at his door.

Not wanting company, Shanghai hunkered lower and ignored the light taps.

Thunder crashed outside and was quickly followed by brilliant lightning. Then the world went dark again as the rain continued to pour down.

The door rattled as a girl's hand pulled it open. "Can I come in?"

Mia's soft whisper cut through the noise of the storm and sliced bits out of his bruised heart. Shanghai sprang to his feet as if she'd pelted him with buckshot. Then pain licked through him from the beating he'd taken from her daddy.

"Go away!" he growled. "You're the last person I want to see."

"Not till we talk."

"Damn your hide, girl. Git." His mouth hurt so badly he could barely speak. He rubbed it before he thought and orange stars flashed in front of his eyes. Damn.

When she didn't leave or say anything, he bit his lips in frustration. Then quick as a panther he flung his empty long-neck so savagely into the trash can, it burst. Broken glass tinkled to the bottom of the can. His boots made hollow sounds that rang on the oak flooring as he stalked heavily to the front door, which he slammed open wider with enough force to show her she wasn't welcome.

Shanghai flipped on the outside light and saw her through the screen. She sure as hell looked different with her long red hair flowing like fiery amber about her pretty face and slim shoulders. Despite his injuries, he tensed when he saw that she sucked in a quick breath after looking at his bronzed shoulders and torso. Then she blushed.

She'd changed out of her jeans. Why the hell had she done that? She looked so soft and feminine and sweet. Her beauty caused a hard knot to lodge in the base of his throat. He'd never seen her in a damp, clingy white dress before; never guessed that a tomboy kid like her could have such a good figure. She was still wearing her bright red boots, though, and she was holding a mud-spattered rose.

What happened to the kid with red pigtails he'd felt so easy around?

He ran a hand through his black hair and inhaled a quick, raspy breath.

"Where'd you get that damn-fool dress?"

"Borrowed it from Lizzy."

"Figures. You should have borrowed some shoes, too."

"Her feet are longer than mine."

Since he was bare-chested and black and blue all over, she could probably see every mark her bullying father had inflicted.

He stood up straighter, maybe to intimidate her. "I wasn't expecting company. I'd better put on my shirt."

"No. It's probably soaking or something. You look...good." She blushed again and lowered her eyes.

"You shouldn't throw away the presents people give you," she said, pulling the screen door open. When she twirled the rose under his nose, he grabbed it and threw it on the floor.

"Girl, don't you know better than to come looking for me—tonight...after..."

Shanghai notched his chin higher as he remembered regaining consciousness and finding Caesar Kemble standing over him, his hand still clenched into a fist and that awful grin on his face.

“I shouldn’t have gone to your house tonight,” Shanghai said. “And you shouldn’t be here now.”

“Don’t you care that I hate what my daddy did to you?”

“No, I don’t care.”

“Why do you hate me?”

“Well, maybe ’cause your bunch has been stealing from my bunch for umpteen generations. Maybe tonight I want to be alone to sulk and drink and nurse my hatred for all things Kemble—including you.”

“I saw you ride that bull last weekend at the Kingsville Rodeo. You were great.”

He inhaled a couple of long, embarrassing breaths while she stared at his chest, and he tried not to stare at hers.

“You’re very young,” he muttered.

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Plenty. Don’t you know nothin’? You’re not a kid anymore.”

“I didn’t think you’d ever notice.”

“Go home.”

“No.”

“I’m twenty-four.”

“So?”

“I’ve already got a girl.”

“Wendy! I know.”

“So go chase boys your own age.”

Some of the sparkle went out of her eyes. Still, she was a vision in that white dress. He couldn’t very well throw her off his porch into the rain. Not when he didn’t trust himself to touch her.

Still, the last thing Shanghai needed tonight was a sassy virgin from the Kemble bunch to tempt him even further down the road that led to hell.

“Can I come in or not?” she whispered again.

“No!”

She laughed as she pulled the screen door open and sashayed past him.

“Are you out of your mind? How many times have I warned you to stay the hell away from me, girl?”

She pretended to count her fingers and then stopped. “Way too many.” She went to his cooler, opened it and grabbed a beer. Then she popped the top off using the edge of his table. She would have taken a long swig of the stuff if he hadn’t grabbed it from her and taken a healthy pull himself.

“You’re not exactly the obedient type, are you?” He watched her as he took another long pull.

“Are you?”

That stopped him cold.

“I was worried sick about you,” she said. “I had to come.”

Her big, golden, long-lashed eyes met his. Again he noted the raindrops glistening like diamonds in her red hair. Most of all he fixated on that single sparkle that clung to the tip of her cute, upturned nose. She was wearing lipstick and eyeliner for a change.

“If you’re looking to get yourself seduced, little girl, follow cowboys like me home and then throw yourself at them.”

“You’re not like that, and we both know it. You’re nice.”

“Nice? You don’t have the gumption God gave a horsefly. Guys aren’t nice. They’re all out to get you.”

“Where’s Spot?”

“At the house.”

Her teeth chattered, and she rubbed her arms to warm herself.

“If your daddy catches us together here, he’ll get one of his bought-off judges to railroad me into some prison until I’m old and gray. Come back when you’re eighteen.”

“What if some other girl...like Wendy Harper gets you before then?”

He didn’t answer.

“I’m all wet and cold. You could offer me a blanket or your shirt or something.” She swallowed a quick breath, and he realized she was even more nervous than he was. Then she picked up the damp shirt that hung on the back of his chair and slipped her arms through the sleeves. When the long sleeves dangled many inches longer than her hands, she began to roll them up.

“Why can’t you ever do what you’re told?”

“Because then I don’t get what I want.” She paused, pulling his shirt close against her body. “Can I help it if I grew up spoiled instead of with a great big chip on my shoulder weighing me down?”

“What if I grabbed you and snapped you against my chest? What if I gave you a kiss or two, would you leave me alone then and go chase somebody closer to your age?”

She straightened up to face him. Beaming brightly, she puckered her lips. “Cross my heart and swear to die.”

“You’re hopeless. Girls are supposed to let the guy do the chasin’,” he said.

“That’s stupid. You’d never chase me.”

“You’re too young.”

“When I’m all grown up, eighteen, would you really want...”

“You’re a Kemble.”

“Kiss me,” she whispered in a low, hypnotic tone. “If my daddy runs you off like he said he would, this might be my last chance. Then I’d have to live my whole life without knowing...what you’re like.”

Hardly knowing what he did, he strolled closer, leaned down and pecked her cheek lightly with his lips. The kiss accomplished, he intended to jump free. “There. Now go!”

“That’s not the kind of kiss I meant, and you know it!”

Her gentle hands circled his wide shoulders, and she seemed to melt into him as she clung tightly. Even as he fought to loosen her grip, he heated where her warm breath brushed his cheek. He noticed that her damp body, although slim and petite, nestled against his huge frame, felt more like a woman’s body than a child’s. Damn her hide, she was a perfect fit.

His heart thudded painfully. He should burn in hell for this alone.

“On the lips,” she pleaded. “Kiss me like you kissed Wendy at the rodeo.”

“You little spy!”

“Just once—please.”

He yanked himself loose. Still, he admired the way she went after what she wanted. Nothing had ever been handed to him, either.

She put her hand to her cheek. “My skin burns where you...”

It was the damndest, most unaccountable thing, but his lips burned from the chaste kiss he’d given her.

One taste of her sweet, velvet skin had rocked him. She was innocent but willing and utterly, utterly adorable.

He wished he was ten years younger so he could crush her close and not feel like he was Satan’s spawn.

He couldn’t stand another second of this, so he stomped out of the house and stood on his porch and watched it rain.

She raced after him.

“Now you really have to go,” he said roughly. “You promised.”

She shook her head. “That was only if you kissed me on the mouth.” Her voice fell so softly, he had to strain to hear it over the downpour.

Being protective of a Kemble was not a role he felt comfortable with. Not when she was so all-fired beautiful.

“Mia—”

When he turned and saw her backlit by the porch lamp, he had to remind himself again she was jailbait. Standing there in her wet dress with her big eyes fastened on his mouth, she personified fresh, young sensuality and femininity.

“Go,” he said.

“How come you still wear that turkey feather I gave you in the brim of your hat?”

“That doesn’t mean anything, girl.”

His heart thudded. Inside his jeans, he was hard and swollen.

He wanted her. Even though it was wrong.

Before she could answer him, headlights flashed, and he heard a car down the road.

“Go to the kitchen. Don’t make a sound. If anybody finds you here, I could end up in jail. Do you understand how serious this is?”

For once she obeyed, and he shut the door behind her. Scarcely had she hidden herself, than his own father stormed up to the porch.

As usual he was drunk. His thick florid face was set in a mask of hatred as he stumbled up the steps. “I—I lost the ranch tonight...or what’s left of it...to Caesar Kemble. Because of you.”

Shanghai sank to his knees and fisted his hands. If someone had slammed a shovel against his spine, he couldn’t have felt more broken.

“It’s your fault.”

“Right,” Shanghai whispered. “Blame somebody else like you always do.”

His father weaved drunkenly. “You had to go over there and stir him up. He came looking for me just like you knew he would. And you just sat here and let him lure me into a game of cards. Entice me with the finest liquor. When it was over and he’d won Black Oaks, he told me you went to his house and strutted around like a bantam cock, like you thought you were somebody, like you thought you were as good as him.”

“I am as good as him.”

“You’re a loser, born to a loser, who’s sprung from a long line of losers.”

“I’ll drive you home and put you to bed, Daddy.”

“Don’t act so damned superior.”

“It would’ve happened anyway!”

“The hell it would! You’ve got high-and-mighty airs, but you’re no better than me. Caesar said it was time all of us Knights got what we deserved—nothing! But that’s not the only reason I came over. Kinky called him and said Mia’s run off again. Caesar said she was upset because he hit you, and they think she might’ve come over here. I don’t reckon you know where—”

Shanghai shook his head just as a pot crashed in the kitchen inside the cabin.

“Who the hell’s in there with you then?”

“Nobody.”

“You lyin’ son-of-a skunk! Caesar’s on his way over here, you fool!”

His father rushed past him, whipped the screen door open and stormed through the house.

Mia screamed from his bedroom. When Shanghai ran inside, his father was dragging her out from under the bed by the hair.

“Let go of her,” Shanghai yelled, shoving him in the back.

“It’s not what you think, Mr. Knight,” Mia began. “He didn’t do anything. It was me. All my fault. He told me to go, but I—”

“I got eyes in my head. He’s bare-chested and you’re wearing his shirt. You were in his bed.”

“Under his bed. I told you. I came over here on my own,” she said.

“How long has this been going on?” his father yelled.

“Nothing’s going on,” Shanghai said.

“She’s here, in your bedroom. It’s the middle of the night. She’s underage. You’ve got a wild reputation and you’re madder than hell at her father. And you’re trying to tell me that you didn’t touch—”

“What do you care? You’re the one who gambled the ranch away!”

His father lunged at him. “That was your fault and you know it! You set me up tonight! Laid a trap. I should’ve seen it coming. You’ve been a wild ’un since the day you was born.”

“Wonder where I get it?”

“Not from me! ’Cause you’re not mine, boy! The only reason your scheming mother married me was to get a daddy for her no-good bastard.”

“You’re lying!”

His father lunged. Together they crashed onto the floor. When Mia leaned down to try to pull them apart, his father slugged her.

Unconscious, she slumped like a limp rag doll to the floor.

Instantly Shanghai forgot his father and dropped to his knees beside her. Smoothing her hair from her face, he touched her throat.

“I didn’t mean to hit her,” his father gasped, all the meanness going out of him at the realization he’d hit Caesar’s daughter. “I meant to knock some sense into you. Not that that’s possible.”

“I think she’s okay.”

Shanghai picked her up in his arms and laid her on his bed. As he held her wrist and found her pulse, which was strong and steady, he saw headlights on the road outside.

Shanghai glanced up at his father and felt an utter coldness. “Somebody’s coming. Go see who it is. I’ll stay with her.”

Her eyes flickered open, and she smiled at Shanghai. “This is where I’ve always wanted to be—in your arms.”

“You’re gonna be okay,” he whispered, stroking her brow.

“It’s Caesar Kemble.” Through the doorway Shanghai could see his father was cowering drunkenly behind the front door. “He swore I could stay at Black Oaks till I died, but if he finds you and her here, he won’t honor that. He’ll have us both locked up for the rest of our natural born years—if he doesn’t shoot us on the spot.”

His father had gone so pale and looked so terrified Shanghai felt sorry for him.

“You never saw me tonight,” Shanghai said. “I wasn’t here. You don’t know where or why I went—understand? You’ll ask questions and act worried. You’ll pretend that you’re concerned about your missing son.”

His father nodded, as if trying to understand, but his eyes were too glazed with booze.

Shanghai turned back to Mia.

“Your daddy’s outside,” he told her, reluctant to leave the brat until he was sure she was okay.

“Run,” she whispered. “I’ll catch up to you when I’m all grown-up.”

In spite of himself he smiled. “When you’re datin’ age, you’ll have every eligible bachelor in Texas chasin’ you. You’ll forget all about the likes of Shanghai Knight.”

“No...I’ll find you when I’m all grown-up. I swear. And I’ll make you love me!”

He laughed.

“I will. Somehow I will.”

“You do that then, little darlin’. But if I don’t git—now—there won’t be much left of me to find or love!”

Funny thing. His last act on the way out the door was to lean down and grab that dang-fool rose she’d pitched at him.

Then he hightailed it out the back door.

BOOK ONE

Smart Cowboy Saying:
You get used to hanging, if you hang long enough.
—L.D. Burke, Santa Fe

One

Fifteen years later
Big Bend National Park, Texas
Where was the damn plane?

“Where are you, you little shit? Why don’t you be a good boy for a change and just come to Daddy?”

DEA Division Director John Hart squinted as he lowered his binoculars and shoved on his sunglasses. His pale blue eyes burned from eye strain from searching the skies so long for one tiny airplane.

So far the seizure was going off as planned. Except for one skinny, dark kid in ragged jeans, who’d run like lightning, eluding his best agents and their bullets, his men had rounded up Octavo Morales’s ground crew. At this very moment the bastards were cuffed and cursing him as they sweated like pigs in a sweltering van parked out of sight in a sharply cut canyon beside the trickle of water that was the Rio Grande.

No way was Hart driving the traffickers to El Paso. Not when the pilot was rumored to be Morales’s half brother. It was hard to be patient and wait, but Hart wanted this plane, its cargo, the pilot and the woman. He wanted them badly.

Ah, the woman.

Mia Kemble.

He still couldn’t believe it.

Bringing Mia Kemble home to the Golden Spurs Ranch was going to be bigger than the seizure. Way bigger. Just thinking about who she was and what this could mean for him made his pulse speed up. His name would be all over the papers. He’d be a hero.

It was high time. Wasn’t he capable and ambitious? Hadn’t he worked hard for the agency for years? Hadn’t he played it straight? Hell, for the past two years he’d worked his butt off on Operation Tex-Mex-Zero, which was an international Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force investigation into the Morales-Garza (MGO) drug organization.

Since the U.S. Mexico border was the primary point of entry for drugs being smuggled into the United States, and he worked El Paso, he’d naturally been forced to play a big role. Operation Tex-Mex-Zero involved seventy separate criminal investigations conducted by dozens of federal, state and local law enforcement agencies, including Mexican and Colombian police officials.

Hart hated working on task forces. There were always too many egos and too much bureaucratic horseshit. When things went wrong, everybody got paranoid. Nobody cooperated. He’d been blamed for mistakes others had made. In the past year he’d gotten himself shot at twice by traffickers—once at point blank range. If he hadn’t been wearing his vest, he’d be dead. He was damn sure he’d been set up, too.

Hell, he was nearly as sick of lawmen as he was criminals. Where had his hard work gotten him? He’d been passed over for all the big promotions for guys who knew how to kiss ass or blow their own horns.

Then the Sombra had contacted him, and things had started to change. He didn’t know who this guy was or why he had it in for Morales, but if Hart could rescue Mia Kemble, get Morales’s half brother and make a major seizure to boot, all in one day, the name John Hart was going to be big on the Texas border. Maybe not as big as Morales, but big enough to suit John Hart. At least for a while. What he really wanted was to get Morales alone and chop him into little pieces.

The Chihuahuah Desert was hot, rugged country even in early spring. Hart’s armpits were ringed with sweat. Watchful for snakes, he grabbed his backpack off the ground and then squatted in the

scant shade of a nearby boulder and kept his eyes trained on the sky. A dozen of his men were hidden behind other rocks, but he preferred his own company.

He shook out a cigarette. Lighting it, he inhaled deeply. Then he pulled out a crumpled photograph from his shirt pocket and studied the redheaded beauty on the magnificent, black horse. Next his gaze turned to the tall, sinister-looking man with her, who held the bridle.

Morales.

Hart inhaled again. Even now, having studied the images dozens of times, the picture still had the power to shock him.

What the hell was Mia Kemble doing with that drug-smuggling, murdering son of a bitch, Morales? The bastard had to be balling the panties off her. And she had to have more tricks up those panties of hers than a talented border whore, or why else would he risk keeping her alive?

Her plane had crashed fifteen months ago in the Gulf of Mexico in the dead of winter. Everybody in Texas believed she was dead. Hell, her own father and husband had had her declared legally dead—no doubt to get their hands on her money. Her husband had even remarried, her twin sister, of all people.

All John Hart knew about the mystery was that it was lucky as hell for him that the bitch was still alive.

Where the hell was the plane?

Impatient, he lifted his binoculars again.

Two

Chihuahua Desert

Northern Mexico

Be careful what you wish for.

The desert wind was blowing hard outside. Despite the close, suffocating heat, Mia shivered convulsively as little pebbles pinged against the fuselage of the Cessna 206 like buckshot. Her nerves were on fire. She wasn't sure how much longer she could stand being locked up in this tight, dark space.

What was wrong? Had she been set up? The plane, which sat on a dirt runway outside the tall walls of Tavio Morales's immense outlaw compound, should have been airborne for el norte, translation—the United States—hours ago.

Mia felt faint and slightly woozy as well as nauseated from the marijuana fumes, which reminded her, of all things, of the woodsy, slightly sweet stink of skunk urine back home on the Golden Spurs Ranch. Mopping at the sweat on her brow with her sleeve, she plucked her soaked blouse off her breasts. Then a gust rocked the plane so hard the towering bales shifted in the cargo hold, several of them falling on her.

When they struck her cheek, knocking her down, she screamed. Then she clamped a hand over her mouth. Being locked up was horrible, but being crushed was even worse.

Her heart thudding, she wriggled free of the heavy bales and sat up, straining to listen for the running footsteps of Tavio's thugs outside or a nervous spray of machine gun fire. When nobody stomped up with assault rifles or machetes, she fought to calm down, sucking in big gulps of air. All the deep breathing did was to make her grow even woozier from the marijuana.

In the total blackness, the thin walls of the sweltering Cessna felt like they were closing in on her. To calm herself, she tried to imagine that she was loping bareback on one of the Golden Spurs' endless green pastures instead of lying here trapped in this airless prison fearing imminent suffocation.

Ever since she'd gotten locked in the attic as a child at the Golden Spurs and that big, yellow-eyed rat had bitten her, causing her to have those awful rabies shots, she'd been afraid of two things—rats and being locked up. Then, after this year, her list of scary things had grown much longer.

Now here she was, a stowaway in a coffinlike cargo hold that was as hot as a furnace and getting hotter, and all because she was so desperate to get back to her little girl and her mother and her father and the Golden Spurs.

She wanted her life back.

Would she die here instead? Probably. Her throat tightened. Who would raise her little girl, Vanilla, then? Watch her grow up? Who was raising her now?

Her mother? Lizzy? Had Lizzy watched Vanilla's first step? Heard her say her first word? Lizzy. Always Lizzy.

Vanilla would be a feisty toddler now. Was she chubby or slim? Docile or as ornery as a terrible two could be? What Mia wouldn't give to know.

Everybody she loved believed she'd been dead for more than a year, which gave her an eerie, unsettling sensation. It was as if the real her had ceased to exist. If something went wrong in the next few hours, Tavio would probably torture and kill her, and her friends and family would never know she'd been alive all these months, thinking of them, longing for them. Shanghai would never know how much she still loved him in spite of everything, either. Not that he would care.

"Oh, Shanghai..." As she sat in the dark, feeling lost and alone, she willed him to think of her, to remember her, at least sometimes.

The nightmarish seconds ticked by like hours. What was Tavio waiting for? Would Marco, his half brother, who was to be the pilot tonight, ever climb in and rev the engine? Would they ever take

off? And what if they did? Would DEA agents really be there to save her as Julio had promised? Could she trust Julio?

It got so hot her skin prickled and burned as if she had a heat rash. She had to get out of here, to feel fresh air on her face and soon, or go mad.

No. Ever since Julio had risked his life to hide her, assuring her the plane was flying into a trap, she'd known this was her best shot at freedom. Clenching her nails into her palm, she fought to hold on to her sanity and courage.

Somebody up there had a twisted sense of humor. Mia wasn't naming names because she didn't want to tempt fate.

"I don't want to sound whiney... Yes, I know I have abandonment issues because Daddy didn't want me and neither did Shanghai, not even when I told him I was pregnant with our baby after that night in Vegas. Yes, I know I prayed for the next man I met to be struck by a thunderbolt and love me so much, he'd never want to let me go.

"But Tavio Morales and his sick obsession? A drug lord?"

Mia knew it wasn't a good sign about her sanity that she talked to herself so much. But could a woman, who'd gone through even half of what she had with Tavio and his criminal army for more than a year, remain entirely sane? She knew she was only holding on by a thread.

Fifteen months ago she'd been married to Cole Knight, having married him because he was Shanghai's brother and for a host of other wrong-minded reasons, which was ironic because everyone in Spur County had thought Cole had married her to get her stock in the ranch.

When things had settled down, she'd had a new baby daughter, Vanilla, to raise and had been working with the horse program at the ranch. If her life hadn't been totally what she'd wished for, at least it had seemed all planned out and stable.

On a whim, because Daddy had said he was flying, too, she'd chosen to fly with Cole the day he'd crashed their plane into the Gulf of Mexico. Cole was probably dead, and there had been times, hellish times, that she wished she were dead, too, like when she'd heard screams coming from that forbidden zone at the compound. Listening to those pitiful cries, she'd suspected that Tavio's men were torturing their prisoners before they murdered them. From her bedroom window, she'd seen blindfolded, handcuffed people brought to those buildings against the north wall of the hacienda, and she'd never seen any of them leave.

The irony was she would have drowned if Tavio Morales, who'd just stolen a yacht, no doubt, after murdering its owners, hadn't been so high on his crack-laced cigarettes he'd seen diving into those stormy, icy forty-foot seas and plucking her to safety as an adventure.

She knew he'd removed her wet clothes that first night, that he'd wrapped her in blankets and warmed her with his own body. Not that she liked to think about that. Since that night, he'd never held her or stroked her or even kissed her because he was waiting for her to want him, too.

She loathed his attentiveness and deadly patience. Obsessed with her, he'd nursed her back to health and brought her to his rancho in the Chihuahua Desert. He'd treated her as kindly as a man of his sort keeping a woman prisoner knew how, she supposed.

When he'd found out she liked horses, he'd let her groom and ride his fine, Polish-Arabian stallion, Shabol. Except for those horrible, forbidden zones, she'd been free to roam and ride Shabol as long as she stayed within the confines of the high walls surrounding his adobe mansion.

When she'd wanted something to read, he'd brought her newspapers. Sometimes he ranted about the stories written about himself and his operation by a certain Terence Collins, who was a liberal reporter for the Border Observer in El Paso.

Even though there was no free press in Mexico, these articles were translated and reprinted in all the Mexican papers owned by Federico Valdez, whom Tavio seemed to hate with a special vengeance. The coverage incensed Tavio mostly because his business ran more smoothly if he kept his affairs quiet. But also she sensed some deep personal vendetta between him and Valdez.

Tavio had threatened the reporter, and Collins had printed every threat, which added to his fame.

Tavio would turn red as soon as he saw his name in a headline or a sidebar. "I will kill him!" he would say as he wadded up the paper. "I will kill them both."

"No," Mia would plead.

"Soon! You will see, Angelita."

Publicity made the officials Tavio bribed look like fools who couldn't do their jobs. If Tavio got too much press, he explained, the federal police comandantes would be forced to demand expensive drug busts to make themselves look good. The United States would put pressure on the politicians in Mexico City, who might demand his imprisonment or death. After all, individual drug lords were replaceable.

Tavio was camera shy and banned all cameras from the compound because he didn't want recent pictures of himself in the newspapers.

But despite his problems he thought of her happiness. When he realized how lonely she was in her room with nothing except week-old, Mexican newspapers to pore over, he'd sent his brother-in-law's girlfriend, Delia, to be her maid. Delia was sweet if down-trodden, but dear Delia couldn't be with her all the time, either, so he'd rescued a kitten his men had been about to use as target practice and had given it to her. She'd named the poor little black cat Negra.

When Delia had confided to her about her troubles with Chito, Mia had observed Chito more closely. He was Tavio's second-in-command, and the worst of a bad bunch. A man of dark temperament, he was as sullen as Tavio was outgoing. Chito always wore a grisly necklace made of real human bones. When he gazed at Mia, he formed the habit of stroking his neck, as if to call attention to the gruesome ornament.

Tavio spent time with her himself, of course. He liked to drive around in the desert in his truck shooting at whatever poor creature darted in his path. When he could, he took her with him on these outings. They were always trailed by jeeps full of armed bodyguards.

Strangely she did not find him totally unattractive. If he hadn't had that scar across his right cheek where a bullet had creased him, he would have been as handsome as a movie star. A born leader, he was ruggedly virile and charismatic. Unlike his men, who were mostly short, dark and stockily built, Tavio was tall with light skin, thin fine features, an ink-black mustache and bright jet eyes that flashed with intelligence and intuition.

He liked people. He paid attention to them. He understood them. When he turned those eyes on her, she was terrified he could read her thoughts. Once he'd told her that when he knew a person's weaknesses and strengths, he knew how to use him.

"People are my tools," he'd said in Spanish, which was the language they usually spoke for she was more fluent in his tongue than he was in hers. "I have to know who can do what for me, no?"

And me? Why has he toyed with me so long?

His mother was the most feared curandera, or witch, in Ciudad Juarez. His men believed he had special powers and that was why he could manipulate people so easily.

He was as fierce and brave as any warrior or pirate king. He was a good father and son. His mother had had some sort of breakdown, and he called Ciudad Juarez constantly to make sure she was being properly cared for.

He was smart, a criminal genius probably. He ran a huge empire that reached to the highest levels in the government from this remote rancho. Army comandantes came to visit him on a regular basis. They strutted around his mansion and barns and he let them take whatever they wanted. Always, they left laughing with thick wads of pesos stuffed in the bulging pockets of their uniforms. Politicians from Mexico City came, as well. When they drove away in the stolen trucks he'd given them, he cursed them for being so greedy. Then he bragged to her, usually in front of an audience, that he had protection at the highest levels in Mexico.

Tavio was responsible. He took international phone calls on his various phones. He worked hard, sometimes day and night, as he had for the last three days and nights, taking pills and chain-smoking those crack-laced cigarettes she hated because they made him edgier and less predictable. He was a highly sexual man, and she was increasingly unnerved by the way his eyes followed her.

He bought her beautiful clothes, including French lingerie, but she refused to wear them. She never smiled at him, either, for fear of charming him.

He wore a gold-plated semiautomatic in a shoulder holster and had a habit of shooting at targets that took his fancy.

Despite his kindnesses and obsession to have her, Mia never forgot that he was a vicious, notorious drug lord, who claimed to be the most powerful man in all of northern Mexico. He said he was linked with another powerful cartel headed by Juan Garza in Colombia, and she believed him.

Terrible things happened here. Hostages were brought here, some of them girlfriends of Tavio's men, girls whom the men said had cheated on them. Sometimes she heard screams and then gunshots. She had watched men carrying heavy sacks out into the desert and feared the worst. Tavio had touched her red hair once and told her she would be smart to love him because there were many graves in his desert.

"Women you have loved before?" she had whispered.

He had laughed with such conceit she'd known there had been countless women before her. She'd sensed how his awesome power had corrupted him.

"Are you threatening me?" she'd asked.

"No, my love. But I am not a patient man." His soft voice had been deadly.

"You are married to Estela."

"This is different—you and me. For you—I send my wife away. This make Chito, her brother, very mad, and that is a dangerous thing to do. I am not like other men. I bore easily. I live for danger. Still, I cannot divorce my wife, the mother of my sons. Not even for you. I am Mexican. Catholic."

Mia had been amazed that he, a notorious drug lord and addict, saw himself as a religious person. Estela had had such jealous fits of rage when he'd brought Mia home, throwing pots and pans at Tavio, that Tavio, to preserve the peace, had personally driven her and their two sons in an armed convoy of jeeps to another walled and heavily guarded mansion he owned in Piedras Negras.

If only Shanghai could ever have been half so fascinated by her as Tavio, none of this would ever have happened. When she'd gotten pregnant and had tried to tell him, he would have listened and believed her. She wouldn't have thought she had to marry Cole. She wouldn't have been in that plane crash.

Suddenly her eyes stung. What was wrong with her that the men she'd wanted, first her father and then Shanghai, hadn't loved her, and a criminal like Tavio did?

The wind was picking up. Rocks hit the fuselage like bullets now. Gusts made the plane shudder. Where was Marco?

Wrapping her arms around herself and bending over, Mia swallowed.

She had to get out of here!

Suddenly she heard shouts outside. The cockpit door was slammed open. Then Chito yelled, "Angelita, come out! We know you're in there."

Tavio didn't know her real name because she'd been afraid to tell him. When she'd pretended she suffered from amnesia, he'd nicknamed her Angelita.

"Tavio, he send me. The peasant, Ramiro, he tell him hours ago where you are. Tavio pay Ramiro. Then he break many things with his gun. He say to surround the plane until you get so hot you come out. But you don't come out, and he's scared you're dead. And we have to fly."

When she didn't answer, Chito yelled at his men to unload the plane and drag her out. It took them less than ten minutes to unload enough of the heavy bales to reach her. They shouted to Chito

when they found her, and he then climbed inside. As always he had a gun in his belt and a knife, which she'd seen him throw with deadly accuracy, in his cowboy boot.

With a low growl, he crawled toward her, grabbed her wrist and yanked her from the plane. She fell to the ground so hard, she lay there stunned for a minute.

“Get the hell out of here,” he told his men, who at his gruff tone, sprinted toward the high adobe walls of Tavio's desert fortress.

When she would have run from Chito, he grabbed her hand and tugged her unwillingly behind him until they reached the compound. She thought he would take her to Tavio's mansion in the middle of the compound. Instead he headed for the forbidden buildings that lined the north wall. Opening a door of one of the low dwellings, he threw her across the threshold. The tiny room was dark and dank and reeked of urine and feces and vomit.

He screwed a low wattage bulb into a socket. In its dim light she saw chairs, ropes, a cot, slop buckets, whips, handcuffs and electric cattle prods.

When she gasped, he grinned.

Did he intend to torture her, rape her? Had Tavio given her to Chito? With a cry, she turned to run.

Laughing, Chito slammed the door and barred her way.

“You run from Tavio,” Chito said, his thin smile chilling her, as he fingered the irregularly shaped bone fragments strung on a gold chain that Delia said came from Pablito's skeleton, a fellow drug dealer Chito had shot for double-dealing and dragged behind his jeep in the desert for hours while he drank tequila. “Maybe you want me instead?” He leered at her.

“Go to hell!”

He laughed, but his black eyes were as cold as ice chips as he leaned down and placed a wedge of wood beneath the door. “Who are you, bitch? Who hid you in that airplane?”

When he lunged for her, she kicked him in the shin and then kned him in the crotch.

He doubled over, grunting in pain. He tugged the knife loose from his boot. “Now Tavio will realize how dangerous you are.”

Adrenaline pumped through her as she raced for the door. He picked up a pair of handcuffs, shook them so they clinked and laughed at her when she pulled at the door and it didn't budge.

“He has killed many for less, gringa. But you very sexy. I see why Tavio like you. If you are nice to me, maybe I put in a good word for you, so he don't kill you. Now—who helped you?”

She hesitated and watched him warily, her gaze flicking to the white chunks of bone at his throat. He was small, only an inch taller than she was, but he was strong and muscular. He could kill her in an instant if he wanted to.

He had black hair and dark skin and a sullen mouth. He had a hair-trigger temper and suffered from paranoia. He didn't get along easily with anybody. Not even Tavio. Delia frequently sported black eyes and bruises. Once Mia had asked her why she stayed with him.

Delia's big brown eyes, which were always so sad and hungry had widened with a strange yearning. Then all the light had gone out of her thin, young face.

“You rich in America. Everybody rich. I see TV. Even the women. You don't understand how it is down here. For women like me. Chito, he protect me. He don't share me with nobody.”

“And that's enough? Do you like him? Love him?”

“My father, he was worse. My older sister...she run away...to Ciudad Juarez.” She strangled on a sob as if there were some horrible end to that tale. “Chito, he help me. He give my family food and money. You lucky. Tavio, he protect you. You should be nice to Tavio.”

Suddenly Chito lunged for Mia, the lust in his eyes, his strength and the stench of his garlic breath bringing her cruelly back to the present. Catching her again even as she pummeled his thick chest, he dragged her screaming to the cot, where he threw her down. When she fell, her head struck a wooden bar on the cot, and she could only stare up at him in dazed confusion.

“Be still, or I will hurt you worse.” He smiled at her as he took his time unbuttoning his trousers. She was struggling to sit up when the thick wooden door behind them crashed against the adobe wall. Suddenly Tavio was a black giant in the doorway, his legs widely spread apart. He twirled his golden gun idly.

Instantly the air grew even more charged with electric, hostile danger.

Sweat popping across his brow, Chito jumped back from the cot, his knife falling with a soft thud to the dirt floor.

Feeling like a trapped animal, Mia got up and hurled herself into Tavio’s arms and clung to him, shaking, even though he smelled of those awful crack-laced cigarettes.

“Why is your heart beating like a rabbit’s?” Tavio whispered against her ear, pressing her closer for a second. He turned toward Chito. “I told you to bring her to me. What are you two doing here?”

“Teaching her a lesson since you won’t.”

She scarcely dared draw a breath as the two men exchanged dark, dangerous looks.

“I will deal with you later for the trouble you cost me, Angelita. Go to your room,” Tavio said, releasing her in an instant. When she hesitated, his whisper grew vicious. “Go! Ahora!”

“Don’t kill him.”

“Don’t tell me what to do, woman!” Although his voice was soft, every word bit her, especially the last one.

And then to Chito he said, still in that soft, deadly tone as he knelt and retrieved the knife. “What were you doing with my woman alone—here? Why was she on that cot?” He began to curse and make crude sexual accusations that terrified her.

As she walked toward the door, she heard Chito’s shrill, raised yelps. Then Chito’s knife whizzed past her and hit the exact center of the door.

She gasped. Just like that—she could have had a blade in the back of her neck and been dead.

A slop bucket hit the wall, splashing its foul contents. Chito screamed that he wanted her punished.

“It is not for you to punish my woman.” Another bucket was knocked over, increasing the sewerlike stench. “I will punish her myself.”

Mia flinched.

“She knows too much. It’s dangerous. She tried to escape in Marco’s plane. We can’t trust her.”

“I never trust her before,” Tavio said. “So—she try to escape? So what? She is a gringa. A nobody.”

“Don’t be so sure. A traitor helped her. She will betray us. I can feel it. In my gut.”

“Let me do the thinking. With my brain.”

“You are married to my sister. This woman...”

“She has nothing to do with my marriage. Your sister is still my wife.”

“The men snicker behind your back. They say it is sick the way you follow her around like a lovesick dog. Like you have no balls, mano.”

“I will prove to you and to her that I have balls—tonight. I will take her. You can stand outside in the hall and listen to her screams. But first, I will teach you a lesson.”

She heard fists, blows, a life-and-death scuffle. Chairs were overturned. A body hit the ground. When gunshots exploded, and metal pinged, Mia pulled the knife out of the door and then ran all the way to her second-story bedroom. She went to her bathroom.

Setting the knife down, she stared at the wild woman in the mirror. Her face was still flushed from having gotten so overheated in the airplane and from her struggles with Chito. Her own sweat had plastered her hair to her skull. Not that she cared.

She was too afraid. If Chito came instead of Tavio, she would either stab him or herself. She couldn’t bear for him to touch her ever again.

Too upset to shower, she ran a shaky hand through her hair. The wet tangles just fell back in her eyes. Squeezing her eyes shut, she fought against her rising fear.

For a long time she stood there, paralyzed. Finally Negra came up and rubbed her leg. Then the cat began to purr. Picking the animal up she returned to her bedroom and sat down on the bed where she began to stroke the cat's soft fur. Doing so restored her a little. If only she knew where Julio lived, she would try to find him and warn him and tell him that he must flee.

For a while Negra endured her affection. Then as if sensing her nervousness, the independent creature sprang to the floor and curled up to sleep on a little rug under a chair. A door slammed downstairs and she heard Tavio shout to his men.

Feeling only slightly relieved, she placed the knife under her pillow and waited. As the awful seconds ticked by, Mia began to feel dull and hopeless. She could do nothing but sit here and wait.

Hours later, when Tavio still hadn't come upstairs, she finally drove herself to get up from the bed and shower. As she toweled off, she was surprised that such a little thing had made her feel better. After she dressed, she paced back and forth at the end of her bed, her heart racing every time she heard Tavio or one of his men shout angrily below.

She should go to bed and yet she was afraid of the bed and what it might mean tonight. As she stared at the melon-colored adobe walls that imprisoned her, they seemed to close in on her more than ever. She wanted to run, but she knew that behind those high, thick, adobe walls, Tavio Morales's immense, adobe mansion was a veritable fortress. An army of gunmen patrolled the rancho and airstrips in trucks and SUVs.

A natural spring with cold, icy water bubbled up from the ground not far from the stables, so there was a sure source of water. Tall cottonwood trees grew around the sparkling pool.

Beyond Tavio's private army, every Mexican peasant, poor men like Ramiro, in the desert belonged to Tavio, as well. If one of their children was sick, Tavio paid for the doctor, buying their undying loyalty.

"They are my ears and eyes," he'd told her. "I love them. And they love me. I protect them, and they protect me. I very important man here. I am much loved." He'd smiled as if that thought pleased him. "If you try to escape, my little friends will tell me. If anyone try to help you, they will tell me, and I kill him."

Remembering Ramiro watching her again, she bit her lips. Worrying about Julio, she went to the barred window. She had to get away or go mad. She had to.

Since the ranch house was located on a slight rise above the desert floor, Mia's plush room with its heavy furniture and red-velvet spread and draperies had a view of the Chihuahua Desert and Tavio's airstrip. She'd spent long hours watching the dusty two-lane road that led across the parched earth to the airstrips. Sometimes she'd watched huge dirt devils race across the barren, beige moonscape, and always she had wished she were free to whirl away.

She'd watched the birds, the vultures, hawks and the eagles with special envy because they could fly. In her other life, she had taken freedom for granted.

If I'm ever free again, I will treasure every single moment.

She had to get out of here.

"Oh, Shanghai..." She called to him, willing him to think of her, willing him to care, willing him to come.

Had she gone mad? Maybe she had if she believed Shanghai could hear her thoughts or that he would be moved by them.

She picked up her brush and sat down on her bed to work with her hair. Despite the thick adobe walls and floors, she heard telephones ring and more doors slam downstairs. She heard men come and go. When heavy boots stomped up the stairs, she cringed.

Tavio's door opened and slammed.

The noise downstairs continued. Much was going on tonight. Trucks roared up to the compound. Planes took off and landed.

After a long time, most of the activity stopped, but still she listened to the silence, almost fearing it more, because soon Tavio would finish whatever he was doing in his own bedroom and come.

Finally she grew so weary, she lay down. At some point she must've fallen asleep because footsteps in the hall awakened her. When her door opened, her hand went to her throat. She sprang up, her heart pounding.

“Are you all right?” Delia whispered across the darkness.

“Delia! It's only you. Come in! I'm so glad to see you! Turn on the light!”

“I know you are in that plane all day. I worry about you.”

Delia lit the lamp, and Mia forgot her own fears when she saw that Delia was limping. The poor girl had a cut lip and two black eyes that were swollen nearly shut. Her hands shook.

“Did Chito beat you again?”

Delia hung her head. “Tavio, he very scared and angry. The Cessna you hide in—it not return. He is afraid, it no going to. He is afraid for Marco. He ask everybody who hide you. Even me.”

Delia sat down beside her, and Mia clutched her hand, finding strength in her kindness.

“Everybody scared. Many rumors. Tavio, he think one of us betray him. He walk back and forth on the balcony outside his bedroom like a big wild cat. He listen for Marco's airplane motor. He smoke too much. The crack make him mean tonight. Meaner than Chito even. He accuse everybody of giving information to the gringos. I ask him if he want more tequila, and he jump at me, his eyes burning me. He so crazy he scare me just by looking at me. I don't go near him. Be careful when he come.”

Mia shuddered. “What about Chito?”

Delia shrugged. “So—they fight each other. Over you, no? It is not the first time they fight over a woman. Then Chito, he hit me. Now he feel better.”

Mia went to her and hugged her. Then she led her to the bathroom and gently washed her face with soap and water.

There were shouts from below. Her eyes large and fearful, Delia pulled away and rushed to the door.

“Stay with me a little while,” Mia pleaded, not wanting Delia to suffer more abuse.

“I have much work. The men, they are hungry.... You hear them....”

“I will teach you to read. Like before.”

Delia's eyes lit up for the briefest moment, and then her face became dull again. She was very intelligent, but her family hadn't been able to send her to school for more than a single year. As long as she was with Chito, she would have a life of dreary servitude and abuse.

“All right. For a little while,” Delia said.

When Delia handed Mia the cartoon page from the last newspaper Tavio had given her, Mia forced a tight smile. They sat down on the bed. Pulling the sheets over themselves, Delia began to read.

The gloomy atmosphere from down below seeped into the bedroom. Mia was glad that they had some occupation to distract them.

In between Delia's nervous, halting words in Spanish and Mia's gentle corrections, Mia heard the rising wind outside but no plane engine. In the passing of the next half hour, she began to feel Delia's severely repressed uneasiness. The girl stumbled over words she'd read easily only yesterday. The men had grown silent downstairs, and again Mia's own fears escalated at the thought of Tavio coming. But still they continued to read the cartoons until Tavio's bedroom door banged again. When they heard his heavy-booted footsteps in the hall, Delia stopped.

Then Tavio burst into her bedroom, flipped his cell phone shut and stared at them with wild, unseeing eyes.

“Marco's dead,” he said.

Delia gave a cry. Newspapers slipped to the floor, and she ran from the room.

“Why did Marco have to get out of the plane?” Tavio whispered, more to himself than to her. “He is the pilot. He never gets out. He should have taken off again. When the DEA agents pointed their guns at him, he panicked and backed into the propeller. He...”

“Oh, no...”

At the sound of her voice, his bloodshot black eyes focused on her face as if he realized she was there for the first time. His dark scowl was terrifying.

He’d been smoking, she knew. As a result his tense, vicious, grief-stricken mood was worse.

“I want you,” he whispered.

She sat up in bed shivering. “Please...no...Not like this!”

“Like how then?” he yelled as he strode toward her. “I want. I take. I’m a beast. A big rat!” He pounded his chest. “A criminal! That’s what you think! That is why you hide all day in that plane. I know you are burning up in there, but you won’t come out. I get scared you’d rather die than be my woman, so I send Chito. He nearly rape you. I save you, and still you say no to me.”

She didn’t look at him. Even so, his burning lust and her fear lit the air between them like a fuse. She could almost feel sparks rushing toward dynamite.

Wrapping the sheet around her, she got out of bed. She was shaking so hard she could barely breathe. “Rape me then. Be like Chito. Go ahead. Take me like an animal. What are you waiting for? I’ve heard those other women scream.”

“Would it be rape?” In two more strides, he was beside her, towering over her like an angry giant.

Not that she cowered.

His rough hand slipped under her hair. “Let go of the sheet. I want to see one of those nightgowns I ordered for you.”

“I’m wearing jeans.”

“Pull the sheet down!”

She flinched and released the sheet. Even when she felt his eyes and her body heat with shame, she did not scream or struggle.

He lowered his dark head to kiss her, his mouth coming so close to hers, she felt his hot, tobacco flavored breath fanning her lips.

She shut her eyes tightly like a child forced to take medicine she feared would taste worse than poison.

Seconds ticked by as she waited for him to kiss her.

Instead of doing so he pushed her roughly away.

“I am not a snake,” he yelled, with the pain of one mortally wounded. “Who do you think you are? Who are you, Angelita? This woman who control me? Me, Tavio Morales? A princess?”

“I am Angelita.”

“Who helped you today?”

The silence was so vast between them she could almost hear the desert wind through the walls again.

He circled her throat with his hands. His touch was gentle. Even so, she sensed his deadly strength.

“Nobody...nobody.... I swear it!”

His fingers tightened. “You lie. I will find out with or without your help. If you set up my brother, I will kill you myself.”

Letting her go, he picked up a chair and hurled it. Then he stomped across the broken bits of the chair and left her room.

When his door banged, she sank back onto her bed and lay under her sheets, feeling limp and helpless, and cold, so cold, even though it was a hot night.

Too wired up to even close her eyes, she lay there, staring at the ceiling for hours. She had to get out of here.

Finally she slipped into a fretful sleep. At first she dreamed of a little girl with brilliant blue eyes and down-soft black hair. The child was holding a rusty spade and digging in the soft, tilled flower bed in the shade near the big house.

Mia tossed her head back and forth and cried out for Shanghai. Suddenly he lay beside her. They were in Vegas. She neither touched nor kissed him even though she ached because she was waiting to see if even once, he'd make the first move. Finally he bent his dark head, and his lips caught hers at just the right angle.

The heat of his mouth made her sigh in surrender and say his name aloud again.

"You shouldn't have come here. We can't be together—not ever," he said. But he kissed her again, and that one kiss turned his words into lies and was everything she'd ever wanted from him and way more.

In her dream she relived how he'd made love to her all night, so tenderly, so sweetly, and so passionately. How he'd given her countless climaxes, and still she'd begged for more.

He'd been tough loving, tender—and sexy. Oh, so sexy.

But he'd rejected her the next morning as if their night together had been nothing.

Next she was on Tavio's yacht shivering, and Tavio was wrapping her freezing body in blankets and telling her in Spanish that she would be all right.

Her dream changed. She was sleepwalking on Tavio's yacht. Only was it Tavio's? She'd found pictures of a blond family buried in a drawer in the stateroom Tavio had locked her in.

In her dream her stateroom door was unlocked, and she wandered out onto the deck and made her way shakily to the stern where she saw a thick chain attached to a huge cleat. An object bobbed that was being dragged in the white frothy wake behind the boat.

The moon was full and the transom light bright. As she leaned over the railing and stared at the thing dancing on the thick chain in the heavy seas behind the boat, trying to make sense of it, she suddenly realized it was the skeleton of a human being, and there was still some flesh on the torso.

Suddenly the skeleton turned into a giant rat and hopped onto the boat. She began to scream and scream for Shanghai to save her.

But Shanghai didn't come. When she turned, the monster chased her straight into Octavio's arms.

As always when she had this nightmare, she woke up screaming. And as too often was the case, Tavio was there, holding her.

"It's all right. There's nothing to be afraid of," he said gently, pressing her against him as he sat beside her on her bed.

He was so hot, he felt like he had a fever. Even though she was still shaking, she quickly pushed away from him. Gathering the sheets to her neck, she shrank against the immense headboard.

"I'm all right. Please, just go."

He hesitated longer than he usually did, and she knew he was remembering the lustful rage he'd been in earlier. "I still want you. No matter what you've done."

"And all I want is for you to let me go."

"Who is this Shanghai?" he growled. "Did he love you even half as much as I do?"

His question made her eyes burn.

His white smile flashed across the darkness. "No?"

Sensing she had to tell him something, she said, "He's dead."

"If you lie and I ever meet him, I kill him, Angelita. Maybe I kill you, too, if you don't choose me."

"Please, just let me go to my country. This isn't going to work. I don't understand your life. You could never understand mine, either. You can't make people love you. Believe me, I know!"

“I throw my wife away for you. Already my men are laughing at me because of you. You try to run away. Some traitor help you. Maybe an informant. They say I am weak because of a woman. Me? Tavio! I have to be strong, or they will cut me to pieces and throw me to the dogs. Every day this Terence Collins, he write more bad things about me, and Federico, he publish these lies because he hate me. The DEA wants me. They put pressure on the authorities here. Do you understand? Intiende? They demand drug busts like tonight. I think Collins and Federico cause Marco to die. And maybe you know who tell them these things about me. Maybe they hate me so much they help you.”

“No. I...”

“In the desert, the weak die. I never, not in all my life, have feelings for anyone like I have for you. My wife, she do nice things for me. She nice woman. But I do not love her. Is different with you. Is fate. You are strong woman. I am strong man. I would make you my queen.”

“You’re a drug lord.”

“If I wasn’t, maybe then...you could like me a little?”

“But you are. You torture people.”

“So do the police.”

“Collins says you kill people. Many people.”

“Bad people. Children look up to me. I am a hero.”

“Maybe that’s what I hate the most.” She stared at the shadowy walls. “I hate this life and everything it means. Poor people are forced into this business.” She was thinking of Julio. “I hate the power you have over me...to keep me here. Of course, I try to run away.”

“I do not rape you.”

“Yet.”

He laughed.

“When you do, you will kill the thing inside me you like.”

“Maybe that would be for the best,” he lashed violently. “Maybe then I kill this thing inside me and I will be free.”

Feeling weary and hopeless, she shut her eyes and willed him to go. Finally she prayed, and after a while, a sense of peace washed her even in this awful place where she felt so lost and weak and helpless.

For a long time, Tavio stayed beside her. She could feel his predatory eyes on her face and body and smell the tobacco on his breath as she prayed for help, for strength, for a miracle. She didn’t dare get up and run because she feared any movement might entice him, that he was that close to the edge.

Seconds passed.

Finally the bed groaned. When she opened her eyes again, he was gone, and she was alone and shivering in the darkness.

Then Shanghai’s deep voice said, “You are not alone.”

She felt his strength envelop her. For several seconds it was almost as if he held her in his arms. Her body grew warm.

Knowing he couldn’t be here even though she felt his presence so keenly, she jumped out of bed, her eyes searching the darkness.

“Shanghai?”

The only sound was Negra purring from her carpet under the chair.

Mia sank wearily back onto the bed alone and felt more crushed by her loneliness than ever.

Shanghai wasn’t here. He’d never been there for her.

The night when she’d pledged her heart and soul and body to him forever had been nothing more than a one-night stand to him. He’d left her for another rodeo the next day.

As always, she had only imagined that Shanghai cared.

She gripped the sheets. She was all by herself in this awful place, and if she didn’t find a way to make something happen, she’d never be free.

Julio. What would they do to that poor boy?

Three

Marco.

Tavio seethed. Instead of the bubbling springs that glimmered like black satin in the moonlight, he saw a dozen DEA agents, their guns trained on Marco's belly as the kid helplessly backed into that whirling propeller. The image repeated itself in Tavio's brain and was always punctuated by Marco's final scream of agony.

His younger half brother had been a mere twenty-five. He'd been smart and loyal. Tavio had had him educated and had taught him to fly. The kid would fly in any kind of weather with any kind of load, land anywhere, day or night. He'd trusted Tavio to take care of him.

Tavio shut his eyes. He'd had such high hopes for Marco. He'd hoped that someday he'd take Chito's place.

Tavio kept seeing Marco and that propeller and blood. So much blood.

His head began to pound. It was the crack and the tequila. He'd smoked too much and drunk too much over too many days and nights. It was making him crazy.

Collins and Federico had stirred up a storm that had led to this. Some snitch within these walls had tipped them and the DEA off. Maybe the same person had hidden Mia in Marco's plane. Why? Did she have something to do with Marco's murder?

Tavio felt anger coil in his gut. Slowly he set his golden gun down on a rock, and when he did, it shot blinding silver fire just as the ripples of the pool did. He blinked. His pupils were dilated. He'd been so busy organizing the runs, he hadn't slept for three days or nights.

He squinted. The light hurt his eyes. Things were too bright and too dark. That, too, was partly because of the crack.

When Angelita was upset, she came here and stared at the reflections of the pool for hours sometimes. Was she looking at herself or the clouds when she did that? He clenched both fists. He wanted to know, damn it. He wanted to know everything about her.

Staring into the black glitter of the water failed to calm him as it did her. In fact it made him feel even more strung-out. But then he was not like her. That was their problem.

Tonight he needed more than sex from her. That was the only reason he hadn't raped her. He needed the comfort of Angelita's arms around him. But she didn't want him. She couldn't love him, and the torment of that was driving him mad.

Estela would have held him close, but he'd sent her away for Angelita. He hadn't touched another woman because of Angelita. He'd waited for this white woman longer than he'd ever waited for a woman, even for Estela, who'd been a teenage virgin.

He could have taken Angelita anytime. Did his restraint mean nothing to her?

He still didn't know how he'd walked out of her bedroom two times tonight. Twice!

Any other woman he would have taken repeatedly until she learned to submit to his every demand.

She wasn't that beautiful. But she was to him. He adored her trim body, her breasts that were in perfect proportion to her body and long legs. Her red hair had natural highlights and her skin was smooth and pale like porcelain. She was as beautiful to him as a goddess. Her full, lush lips haunted his dreams. He longed to taste every inch of her. He wanted her kisses all over his skin until every cell in his body caught fire. But afterward he wanted her to hold him in the darkness and be his tender friend. He had never wanted such things from a woman.

But she was strong and mysterious. She was egotistical in the way a man was egotistical. She knew what she wanted and what she didn't want. He wanted to know her mind, to be her friend. He wanted her to care, but she hated his rotten business too much to see him as man, who was just

like any other man. Why couldn't she see that he was trapped just like she was in this nasty life he'd created and now hated because white men like Collins and Valdez believed he was an animal?

Valdez! How he hated Valdez!

Didn't she know he would have preferred to be a legitimate businessman as his father had been? But he'd been born a despised bastard. In fact Federico Valdez was his half brother, his father's most honored son, who now ran the family business. Valdez was his rich, white half brother who thought Tavio was dirt.

His brilliant father, also named Federico Valdez, could trace his ancestors to the Spanish conquistadores. He had been powerful in Ciudad Juarez. He'd belonged to an old and much-respected border family that had accumulated wealth over several generations. Tavio's Indian mother had been a maid in his house. They had fallen in love briefly. Tavio was the result.

Since his legitimate children were years older, his white father had made Tavio a pet when he'd been young, carrying him with him everywhere—to his factories, farms and offices. This had incensed his blond, American-born wife and her white sons, especially the eldest, Federico. But their father had never claimed Tavio as his son. After all, his wife and he had six legitimate, white children.

His father had sent Tavio to a good private school, and school had been easy. Just like making money was easy if you got into the right business. Tavio had wanted to be rich like his father. When he'd graduated from college, he'd begged his father for a job in one of his companies, even a lowly one. Federico, who'd been running the business, hadn't wanted him. Tavio had been hurt and furious but determined to become even richer than his father and brother. Drug running had seemed the quickest way toward realizing his dreams of being as rich and successful as the family that had spurned him.

In the beginning, like all young fools, the drug business had seemed exciting more than dangerous. He'd hired desperately poor people as his runners. They'd taken all the risks. When they'd been busted, he'd lost his shipment, but they'd gone to prison.

Poor women, too many of them to count who would do anything to feed their children, were sentenced to thirty years, which meant their children were orphans. That had meant nothing to him then. But sometimes, late at night or when peasants came to him begging him for favors, these things haunted him now.

His business had grown, sí, and soon he'd had to fight off competitors. To expand he'd entered into an ever-changing, complex relationship trafficking cocaine for the Colombians. In time he'd been forced to kill many people to maintain control of what was his. He did not enjoy killing, but it was part of doing business.

Too late, he'd learned what a vicious, deadly game he was in. When he killed, he made more enemies, and he'd had to become tougher to survive. His best men, like Chito, were those he could trust the least because they wanted to take over. The rules of his business were as simple as those the desert animals lived by. Win—or lose. Live—or die. Kill—or be killed. When you lived like that long enough, it changed you.

When he'd been young, he'd thought he'd retire with a big ranch in northern Mexico. He was now rich enough to retire, richer than he'd ever dreamed of being. But if he ever quit he would have to leave Mexico. Then many of the people he protected would die.

So what? The little people always suffered in Mexico. But as long as he was alive, certain people in the business would be nervous. Hit men would try to track him down and kill him. So, he stayed, and to stay, he had to be strong.

He hadn't thought of leaving the business for a long time. Not until Angelita. She made him think of Paris or London or maybe a Caribbean island or South America. Never her country, America, because he was a wanted man there.

He still desired her, more than ever, even after tonight when she'd turned him away when he'd been crazed with anger and fear and desire. Even during saner periods, when he was alone, his blood

would pulse as he thought of her in one of those thin nightgowns he'd bought her that had cost enough to feed a family of peasants for a year.

How much longer could he play this waiting game when his men were taking bets on how many nights it would take him?

Angelita was afraid of him. Always before he'd liked the edge fear lent to sex. It was like a spice to make a dish hotter. But not with her. He did not want her afraid. She was an intelligent creature of light and love, and he wanted her to stay that way.

He remembered going into his white father's mansion as a small, impressionable boy. His father's white wife had seemed like a queen.

Tavio wanted to know Angelita and for her to know the real him. He wanted her acceptance and her trust, and he had no idea why these things mattered or why she mattered. They just did. He did not want to believe she'd had anything to do with Marco's death.

Disgusted with these thoughts, he ripped off an ostrich-skin boot and flung it on the ground. Then he yanked off his other boot. Next he whipped his leather belt out of the loops. Last of all he took off his thick gold Rolex. Without bothering to remove his jeans or shirt, he dove into the icy water and swam to the bottom to where the caves began, willing to brave the freezing spring in an attempt to kill the molten desire that was devouring him.

His head broke the surface again, and he stared at her window, which was dark now. He had never loved anybody before. He knew that now. Not enough to sacrifice everything for them. He'd admired his father. He'd longed to love him and be loved by him like little Federico had been loved, but it hadn't happened. No matter how hard Tavio had tried, in the end his father had refused to claim him as his son. When his father had disowned him in favor of Federico, who was weak and spineless, walls had grown around his heart. He'd never intended to let anyone make him feel that needy again.

He stared at his mansion. He had so much. How could not having this one woman care about him matter?

He loved his golden gun that had been a gift from a former president and his machine guns. He loved his prized Polish-Arabians. He loved his rancho and his trucks. He loved his planes. He loved the power he had over other men. He loved the way their eyes glazed over with fear when he got a certain edge in his voice. He had loved his little brother, too.

So many things made him feel big and powerful as he had not felt when he'd been the bastard son of a rich man. He loved the pale-brown desert and the barren red mountains.

He liked animals, even Angelita's good-for-nothing, scrawny black cat. But other than Marco and his own sons, he had never loved people much.

Who was she, this woman who so possessed him? She kept her secrets. Never before had he felt such a visceral link with another human being. He thought that lack was what made him strong. Now he thought he'd been a dead man all his life.

Until Angelita he had been going through the motions of living. When he had pulled her out of the gulf and she'd been so white and cold in his bed, whimpering and shivering as she'd slept for long hours in his arms, a tenderness he'd never known before had taken possession of his heart. Even when she'd been weak and defenseless, he'd sensed her strength and fierce independence. When she'd opened her eyes and looked into his, she said, "Shanghai," and had smiled with an infinite yearning that had melted his heart. Then she'd snuggled closer and clung to him, repeating that name again and again.

He had wanted to be that man. He wanted her to say his name and look at him that tenderly.

Estela, his wife, was an easy woman, who got what she wanted through sexual manipulation and feminine wiles. She did as she was told. It had been pleasant living with her until he'd brought Angelita home. Estela had never minded his other girlfriends. She'd understood he was simply a man. But from the first when she'd seen how he was with Angelita, she'd gone crazy with jealousy. Even

now she screamed at him on the telephone if he called his sons. He felt bad to cause her so much pain, but he couldn't help himself.

Angelita was fate.

The sound of boots stomping across the hardpacked dirt broke into his thoughts. When he saw it was Chito, he swam for his gun. They hadn't seen or spoken to each other since their fight and the bust, and he didn't trust him.

"I'm sorry about Marco and the plane and the cargo," Chito said. Then he threw a bunch of newspapers and a videotape onto the ground.

"What are those?"

"More articles written by that pendejo, Terence Collins. And a videotape." Chito lit a cigarette. "She throw you out, no? She's the reason you're swimming in a cold pool at night, eh?"

"Shut up. What's Collins up to?"

"Take her. Force her. Get it over with. Break her, like you would a horse. Find out what she knows. If she had a hand in Marco's death, you must kill her, so the men will respect you again."

"She had nothing to do with Marco!" Tavio wished he knew that for sure. "I have heard there are new ways of breaking horses. Gentler ways."

"You scare me. Don't go soft. If we get soft, we die. Don't let her change you."

Live—or die. Kill—or be killed.

"I came looking for you for another reason," Chito said. "There's been a second drug bust on a ranch north of El Paso. We lost Paulo's plane, too—the crew, the pilot and the load."

Tavio let out a stream of obscenities.

"Juan just flew in with these latest newspapers from Ciudad Juarez. Collins wrote an exposé on you and some of the politicos we pay for protection. He aired this videotape on a local news show in El Paso. There's some footage of you with Garza in Colombia. And some of you and me paying off Lopez in Chihuahua City. Your brother ran it in Ciudad Juarez on his television station."

"Collins got all that on film?"

Chito nodded grimly. "Something big is going on. Lopez is under house arrest. I called Comandante Gonzales to see what he knows, and he wouldn't take my calls. Somebody's feeding the DEA and Collins a hell of a lot of information."

Tavio frowned. Federico had always been jealous of him. Was he in the middle of this? "But who is selling me out?"

"Any one of the bastards. If the price is right... We must find this traitor and kill him. If you have to kill ten men to get the rotten manzanas, you must do it."

Kill—or be killed.

Tavio was silent for a long time.

"Maybe we don't have to kill so many. Maybe just one or two—to set an example."

"But—"

"You're right."

"Who do we go after first?"

"Angelita knows who helped her. Rape her. Threaten to cut her. Make her tell you!"

"Bastardo, did you hide her in that plane?" Tavio demanded, knowing the answer.

Enough pesos would buy almost anything. In the end he had not had to rape Angelita to find out who'd hidden her. He'd simply put up a reward for the information. Three peasants had come forward with different versions of the same story.

Julio's thin form shook with fear as he stumbled ahead of Tavio through the brush-studded sand hills at the foot of the red mountains.

"Tell me, and I'll spare your life."

The boy said nothing.

"Did she let you fuck her?"

The boy ran faster. “No! I never have nothing to do with her.”

“Who pays you? How does he contact you?”

The boy fell on his knees, mumbling incoherently.

“Get up!”

When they were far enough from the compound so no one could see what he was about, Tavio stopped and raised his golden gun, taking careful aim at the middle of Julio’s thin back.

Not wanting the details of the boy’s death to get back to his father, Tavio slowly lowered his gun. The kid was too young. His father was a hardworking peasant and devoted to Tavio. The boy hadn’t wanted to work for Tavio, but his father, whose face and body were wrinkled and worn beyond his years, had forced him because the money was good and there were so many mouths to feed. Tavio hated himself for not having the balls to shoot the kid in the back.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” Chito screamed. “He’s chota—a cop—he’s been ripping us off. Because of him we lost a load in Del Rio. We lost Paulo. And maybe Marco. He talked to the DEA and to that bastard reporter. Remember the videotape.”

“Shooting him is too good for him. Let’s put him in the cave. We’ll let him die slowly with the snakes.”

“Snakes!” the boy moaned, whirling around. “I didn’t do anything! I swear!”

Chito’s savage, gloating smile was a blur of white and gold that matched his necklace. Tavio wished he was enjoying this half as much as Chito, but he felt sorry for the boy. And even sorrier for his father.

He thought of Marco. Then he reminded himself that this was business. Killing Julio was but the tiniest piece in their game plan for revenge.

Four

Ciudad Juarez, Mexico

Terence Collins pitched his cigarette into a dank gutter. The squalid backstreet that stank of cheap whores, garbage and sewage wasn't far from Ciudad Juarez's Avenida Juarez.

So far and yet so near.

Collins's gaze turned heavenward. Ominous black clouds hung low over El Paso.

Rain? Not likely. But rain was always welcome in Juarez.

He pulled out his pack of cigarettes and shook out another cigarette. When a white, bulletproof limousine followed by two armored black SUVs crammed with armed bodyguards whipped past him, he put the cigarette back in his shirt pocket.

The convoy made a sharp u-turn, and the limo pulled up in a swirl of dust.

Tinted windows rolled down, and Collins stiffened as a dozen bodyguards inspected him coldly.

Valdez was on time—as usual. The bastard!

A burly man in a brown uniform carrying an assault weapon leapt out of the passenger side of the limo to open the door for him.

When there are no rules at the playground, the bullies rule.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” Terence asked in a mild tone as he pulled his cigarette out again and climbed inside, knowing the answer full well.

“I'm allergic,” Federico Valdez snapped, his lip curling as he stared at a yellow stain on the cuff of Terence's shirt. Federico fastened his seatbelt.

“Thanks for continuing to allow your newspapers over here to translate and publish my pieces on Morales.”

“My pleasure. After all, you did get yourself nominated for a Pulitzer once.”

“Ever since Pete Cantú got gunned down last year, my boss, Juan Ramos... You may know him—”

“I've heard of him, yes. Good things.”

“Well, he's got less backbone than a squid. A few months back he told us to censor everything we write about the drug cartels.”

“Pete Cantú?” Valdez looked puzzled. “Oh, right,” he murmured. “That journalist in El Paso, who wrote about the Morales-Garza cartel and then got shot in his driveway when he was playing with his kids.”

“Ramos says we've lost the war, so why should we risk our necks—”

“Smart guy. But you're too stubborn to stop—like always.”

“My mother said I was born with a death wish. And you? You're not one for causes. I'm surprised you give a damn about Morales.”

Valdez looked bored. “People are full of contradictions. That's what makes them interesting.”

“With your factories, you're exposed. Why risk such an enemy?”

On the surface Valdez appeared unruffled, and yet there was something hard in his eyes. “It's personal.”

Without bothering to fasten his seat belt, Terence sank wearily into the plush leather and stared out the tinted window at the decaying buildings. He fought to ignore the bodyguard leering at the girls, whose smiles were glossy as they waved to him, halving their prices. The baby-faced hookers in their boots and miniskirts were hard up to sell themselves at this hour since the American teenagers, who paid for their services on Friday and Saturday nights, were soundly asleep in their suburban homes in El Paso.

The seat felt too good. Terence was glad the windows were tinted. Once this city had inspired him to write prize-winning journalistic pieces. Today he needed blinders against the daily brutalities

of Ciudad Juarez. If he closed his eyes, Terence would be asleep and snoring in seconds. With a tight smile, he placed the forbidden cigarette between his lips.

When Federico frowned at his idiotic show of defiance, Terence scowled back just for good measure. Normally he didn't give a damn how tired or shaggy he looked. Nor did he worry about making a good impression on assholes like Federico, who were part of a big problem that had millions fleeing from this country to el norte in search of decent jobs.

For some strange reason Terence felt at a disadvantage today. He yanked the cigarette out of his mouth and stuffed it into his shirt pocket. Maybe he was getting old. Or maybe he felt off balance because Valdez, who'd once been his brother-in-law, had set up this little family reunion.

Valdez was using him to piss off Morales. Why?

That Valdez had tracked him down was no easy feat, but then he probably had spies everywhere. For various reasons, Collins moved around a lot. One was money. Another was that he'd made a lot of enemies and didn't want to be easy to find when his eyes were shut. Right now he was bunking in with three newly divorced guys, who were such slob they disgusted even him.

Behind his scowl Collins hoped like hell he didn't appear as tense and unsure as he really was as they were whisked through the garbage-strewn streets while being tailgated by the black SUVs.

Rich bastards like Federico, who stank of money, ran the developing world, or at least this dusty stretch of it, and there wasn't much one loud-mouthed journalist, who was growing old before his time, could do to make things right.

Leaning back against the leather, Valdez stretched his long legs. Valdez's short hair was as black as outer space. The bastard probably dyed it. But even without his talented barber and the accoutrements of wealth, he would still have been handsome in that unfair way.

Terence studied his carved profile and realized he reminded him of somebody he'd seen in a photo recently. Who?

Valdez was as tall and aristocratic in his gray Armani suit as Collins was rough and unkempt in his wrinkled shirt and khakis that he'd lived and slept in for the past two days on the road in his ancient van with his camera crews, boom mikes and photographers.

Partly because he hadn't been able to find his comb or his razor in the debris of his beer-can strewn apartment, Collins hadn't bothered to shave his craggy jaw or comb his too-long, salt-and-pepper mop, either.

What the hell? Other than some junk food he'd grabbed at gas stations he hadn't even been bothering to eat lately. He'd been too busy rushing around with his motley crew filming a low-budget documentary about the contaminants in the Rio Grande.

At fifty Valdez looked as vibrant and arrogantly full of himself as he had at thirty. Collins was a battle-worn forty-nine. He had lines beneath his eyes and grooves on either side of his mouth. His skin was as dark and leathery as a shrunken head's. Dora had divorced him long before she'd died, but once, long ago, she'd been the beautiful, younger sister of Valdez's American-born wife, Anita. Valdez men always went for fair-skinned Americans.

The border was a hellish place. Smugglers were taking over the border towns at a rapid clip. They bought off the authorities or killed the ones who couldn't be bribed. Then they trafficked in drugs and people at their will. Corporate bandits like Valdez worked the poor like slaves and polluted without restraint. Thousands of people ate garbage, literally, from the dumps in northern Mexico. Nobody cared that millions of kids got almost no schooling because their parents couldn't afford books and had to put them to work. Thus, generation after generation grew up to be unskilled and were sentenced to lifetimes of manual labor. There were lots of kidnappings both for money and to make people disappear. Ordinary women were their husbands' chattel. Most people didn't think much about these atrocities. They were simply a way of life.

Still, such a hell attracted its share of saints, who naively set up clinics and soup kitchens and schools and churches on both sides of the border without bothering to buy the proper authorities.

When these trusting souls got into trouble—recently there had been a lot of kidnappings for ransom—they would turn to the media and tell their desperate stories about the plight of the poor and the exploitation of those who fought to help them. It made for interesting reading, but nobody did anything.

Terence had been as young and idealistic as the most naïve of them when he'd arrived here in his twenties. Dora, his wife, had been just as inspired as he'd been, but after she'd lost the babies and they'd adopted the twins, she'd wanted more than poverty and chaos and struggle. She'd wanted him to make money. Then they'd lost Becky, too, and been left with only Abigail. Dora had blamed him for Becky and had demanded that they leave the border.

“It isn't fun anymore,” she'd said. “It's become dangerous.”

The day he'd been nominated for a Pulitzer for doing what he believed in, Dora had sucked up to Daddy and gone back east to resume the upper-class lifestyle to which they'd both been born and had grown up hating. He'd stayed on, growing wearier with the same old battles and lonelier as the years had passed.

When Dora had died Abby had returned to Texas. She was grown now, and he rarely found time to see her. Strangely she loved him, and was proud of his work.

Thus, he'd never had a life of his own. Like a lot of people in their fifties, he gave his life a grade. Lately he'd begun to wonder what difference anything he'd ever done had made. The border was a worse pit than ever, and it was still ruled by slick creeps like Valdez. And by drug lords far more vicious than Valdez. He had a neglected daughter, who barely knew him.

He stared at Valdez's aquiline nose. Who the hell did the arrogant jerk remind him of? Who?

The limo and its convoy slipped through the dirty streets like stealthy sharks slicing through dark waters.

“So, why did you call and invite me to Mexico to interview you?” Collins said at last, his voice cold.

“For once you and I are on the same side.”

“Will miracles never cease?”

Valdez pressed his mouth together.

This was a setup. Collins could smell an agenda a mile away. Still, being able to talk face-to-face with Valdez, the CEO of Dalton-Ross Chemicals, a major polluter in the area was a rare opportunity he could ill afford to miss.

When the limo approached a clump of people standing in front of a stunted tree in someone's front yard, Terence leaned forward and told Valdez's chauffeur to slow down. Terence rolled down his window and smiled faintly at the crowd of people, who were kneeling and crossing themselves and placing cards and photos in front of the leafless tree.

“They're transforming that pitiful trunk into a shrine because the lady who lives there found the image of the Virgin de Guadalupe in its bark,” Collins said, breathing in the stifling dust and heat that smelled faintly of sewage.

“I know. I read your story on the miracle yesterday.” Valdez stifled a yawn. “At least it gives the poor something to read about besides the constant murders on our streets.”

“So why did you call me?”

“To discuss our dangerous enemy, old friend.”

Terence started at the real concern in Valdez's voice. Despite the air-conditioning that was all but blasting ice from every vent, Terence began to sweat a little under his rank collar.

Valdez's black gaze sharpened. “Octavio Morales has a price on your head. That's nothing new. But he'll pay ten times more if he gets you—alive. The sicko wants to play with you before you die. His men are already in your city.”

“So? I lived through Mexico's thuggish Interior Ministry investigating me.”

“This is different.”

“Why do you give a damn?” Terence said, making his voice blander than he felt.

“Let’s just say Morales is a hobby of mine.”

“Why?”

Valdez’s eyes turned hard and cold. A nerve ticked along his jawline. “If I reveal a family secret, will you promise never to write about it?”

Collins hesitated. Suddenly he knew who Valdez’s carved features resembled. “All right.”

Lowering his voice, Valdez leaned toward him. “Octavio Morales is the son of a puta who once slept with my father.”

“He’s your brother?”

“No!” The denial held ferocious hatred. “I have five brothers. He is my father’s bastard. Several years back Tavio sucked a favorite cousin of mine into the drug trade. The DEA busted him, and he was forced to sell Morales his beautiful rancho at a very cheap price in the Chihuahua Desert...to make up for the drugs and the money he owed Morales. Then Morales accused him of sleeping with one of his girlfriends. My cousin never made it to prison. Morales shot him and dragged his body all the way from this city to his rancho.”

“I see.”

“The rancho had been in our family for six generations. Morales wants what I have. He wants to be me. My father made the mistake of educating him beyond his station. When my father wanted me to let him enter the family business, I said no. Tavio decided to destroy me. One of my executives was stabbed in what looked like a robbery last week.

“The more powerful he becomes, the worse it will be for me. The reason I publish your articles is because he’s phobic about making the papers, especially when there are photographs of him. A lot of peasants see him as a folk hero. He eats that up. But he knows that when the real truth about all his sordid atrocities is made known, there will be a public outcry to stop him.

“So, I have come to you with a big story that could get him the kind of international notoriety he most hates. This story has all the right elements. It’s a mystery...about a beautiful American woman who disappears into Mexico. It’s also a beauty and the beast tale.”

Fascinated, Terence stared at Valdez.

“Tavio’s prisoner is a celebrity. If he’d known who she really is, he would have let her go or shot her and dumped her body months ago.”

“And you know who she is?”

Valdez smiled. “I have a picture of her on a magnificent Arabian Tavio lets her ride. He’s holding the bridle. She’s a famous Texas heiress. If you were to print the picture—”

The hair on the back of Collins’s neck stood on end.

“Give this to somebody else. I don’t do disappeared people.”

“I remember what happened to your daughter...Rebecca. I’m sorry.” He hesitated. “But with your personal knowledge about such a situation coupled with your immense talent—why, you’re the only person who can write this story. You would tell it with compassion.”

Terence rubbed his eyes. Valdez had still been his brother-in-law when Rebecca had vanished into Mexico. He tried never to think about her, but he couldn’t stop himself. He still wondered... on a daily basis if she was alive.

“If I wrote such a story, he might kill her.”

“Or feel pressured to let her go. Remember, he wants the poor to see him as a folk hero. You could make people identify with the kidnap victim and sympathize with her family...instead of him. If her family brought the right kind of pressure, he would have to release her.”

“Sorry.”

“You owe me.”

When Collins looked up in surprise, Valdez’s smile was sly. “Who do you think has been feeding you information about him all these months?”

Suddenly Collins could barely contain himself. For months he'd wondered who the Sombra was.

"I sent you that videotape of Octavio and the federales."

"But how did you penetrate his organization...?"

Valdez's smile grew hard. His eyes were equally cold. "Like all shadows, the Sombra has secrets he must keep."

"Okay, I'm curious. Who the hell is this 'disappeared' heiress?"

"Mia Kemble."

Terence whistled. "Of the Golden Spurs Ranch?"

Valdez handed him a photograph of a redheaded woman on a magnificent, black Arabian stallion. She was pale, and her eyes looked haunted. Tavo was holding the bridle as he stared up at her. Everything was just as Valdez had described. The murdering son of a bitch was besotted.

Terence's blood congealed even as his heart began to thump at a maniacal pace.

"How do I know the picture isn't fake?"

"Has the Sombra ever lied to you before?"

Terence shook his head. He couldn't help but think of Abby. For her sake, the Kembles of the Golden Spurs Ranch were the last people on earth he should mess with.

If he refused, the Sombra would simply tip off some other reporter.

Hell. Once a bastard, always a bastard. When had he ever let his personal life get in the way of a good story?

"Can I keep the picture?"

Valdez smiled.

Five

Buckaroo Ranch

20 miles south of Austin, Texas

“Tonight’s the night.”

Shanghai gritted his teeth. The jeering note in Wolf’s deep voice on the other end of the line set Shanghai on edge so much he wanted to punch him.

“You’re doing it, hombre. You’re asking her the question. Tonight! Before you leave for the big rodeo in Vegas.”

“Don’t remind me, brother.” Shanghai’s stomach tightened as he clutched the cell phone a little closer to his ear. To settle his nerves, he took another long pull from his Lone Star.

What was he waiting for?

“You still there, brother?”

“Where the hell do you think I am?” Shanghai shot back in the space of a heart beat.

“So, what’s the big deal? You know she’ll say yes.”

“Hell, maybe that’s the big deal. You ever been married?”

“Twice. When I was still in the military.”

Wolf had flown helicopters in the Middle East. Recently he’d been honorably discharged from the National Guard.

There was a short silence. “Divorced twice, too,” Wolf admitted.

“Then you’re a two-time loser.”

“I was gone a lot. Top-secret shit. They couldn’t take the stress.”

“Why the hell am I asking you for advice?”

Ever since Shanghai’s daddy had run his mother off, he’d been afraid he’d do the same.

“Just ask her, okay. Just get it over with, you wuss.”

“I ain’t no wuss.”

“Not when we train. You can take any kind of pain then. But you’re a wuss.”

Wolf was his physical trainer. Modify that—his psycho trainer. Wolf was six foot six and built like a lethal African-American god. He had a black belt in karate and had been in Special Forces. He’d even done a bit of bull riding. The man worked him until every muscle in his body ached.

At thirty-nine Shanghai was hardly the newest kid on the block. Not that he ever liked thinking about his age.

Bull riding was an extreme sport. He put up with Wolf’s abuse to stay in shape to ride bulls.

Why the hell did he still want to ride bulls?—that was the million-dollar question. He’d proved himself—hadn’t he?

Unlike most in his profession, he’d made a lot of money and had invested it well. His land, which was just south of the Austin airport, was worth more every year. Why did he keep putting off moving here and ranching full-time? He couldn’t tell himself he rode just for the money anymore.

“When it comes to women, you’re a wuss. You see a pretty little filly you’ve bedded a few times and you like a lot in your rearview mirror, and you stomp on the accelerator. When things start getting serious, you do it every time, brother. Every time.” Wolf laughed. “Zoom.”

“If you were here, I’d punch your lights out.”

Wolf roared. “No, you wouldn’t. Even you’ve got enough sense not to start something you can’t finish.”

He was so right. Although some of his bull riding friends might disagree, Shanghai didn’t have a total death wish.

“Gotta go,” Wolf said. “A mama just walked in with her fat kiddo, who probably wants to take karate lessons. No can do. The kid’s gotta lose some major weight first. Do some jogging. Eat broccoli instead of fries.”

“Go easy on ’em, huh? Eating broccoli may be a radical thought.”

Eager for their blood no doubt, Wolf roared with laughter again as he hung up.

The fat kid and his mama would be in tears long before Wolf got through talking to them. Wolf either toughened you up or he made mincemeat out of you.

Shanghai inhaled the aroma of pine and smoke. There was nothing better than the smell of two fat grass-fed sirloins sizzling on a grill out in the country, unless it was knowing you were going to sit across the table and eat them with a loving woman, who just happened to be a gorgeous blonde and a rancher, and then share her bed. Or rather his bed.

He would ask her. He wasn’t a wuss.

He lifted his beer to his mouth again. Abigail Collins was better than a bar full of adoring buckle bunnies, and he’d had his share in his years on the road. Despite the ace bandage on his right arm, and maybe because of the Bufferin he’d been gulping like malted milk balls along with the beers, he was feeling pretty good.

It was time he settled down. Way past time. For fifteen years his family had mainly been his rodeo pals. A lot of his friends his age were already retired and married with kids. What the hell had been stopping him?

He knew what—Mia Kemble. For years he’d told himself she didn’t matter. Then two years ago she’d seduced him in Vegas and run off before he’d figured out how much he’d wanted her to stick around. He’d thought he hated her for what she’d pulled—coming on to him all hot and heavy when he’d been injured and then confusing the hell out of him the next day after they’d had sex. She’d picked a stupid fight, demanding to know how he felt and what he’d thought about her and what had happened. As if he’d known or could have put it into words.

He’d said a bunch of idiotic stuff and had driven off furious, and so had she. Hell, he couldn’t remember what he’d said.

Then a month later she’d called and wanted to toy with him some more. Since he’d been thinking about her for a solid month and longing for her, he’d felt off balance and tongue-tied. They’d immediately gotten off to a bad start again. His feelings had put him under some weird pressure. Maybe hers had affected her the same way.

How come you didn’t call me, cowboy?

How come you ran off, darlin’?

I didn’t think you wanted me to stay.

You didn’t think period. Neither the hell did I. So we wound up in bed when we shouldn’t have.

Is that what you think? What if I’d gotten pregnant that night, huh? Would you even care?

Anybody who’d known him as long as she had had to know he thought the world had too many stray kids. Hell, he might be one himself for all he knew. Maybe he was the reason his sorry old man had gone so wrong.

What kind of lowdown cheap shot was that from a girl? How many times had he turned her question over and over in his mind when he thought about her and Cole and their kid?

His rational mind did hate her.

He’d left his home and kin to get clear of the Kembles, stayed away, too. Only she’d tracked him down just like she’d promised.

As if going to bed with him was nothing, she’d married his brother and had a baby. When she’d gone and gotten herself killed, conflicting feelings he hadn’t known he’d stored a mere one layer under his thick skin had burst inside him. The pain had been like claws shredding his heart. He’d thought he’d bounce back, but apparently without her on this earth, his world had permanently darkened.

He would have retired from bull riding but for her accident. Hell, he'd needed to do something to forget.

Ever since her plane had gone down, he'd ridden bulls with a death-defying vengeance. He was looking forward to riding in Vegas way more than he was to proposing to Abigail.

Damn her hide. Mia was a Kemble through and through. She'd hopped in his bed and stolen his heart—without him even knowing it until it was too late. Before he'd figured out what was eating him she'd had the bad taste to call him and taunt him that she could have gotten pregnant.

Just about the time he'd faced his feelings and had decided to go lookin' for her, she'd up and gotten herself hitched to his brother.

Hell. Somehow she'd made him care.

He wasn't supposed to love her. They'd never really dated. For most of their lives, she'd been too damned young for him. Then there was the not insignificant fact she was a Kemble.

She'd been a fixture in his young life. He wasn't sure when annoyance and affection had changed to love.

She was dead.

Love or not, he had to move on.

"Then why doesn't she feel dead?" he whispered, clenching his longneck a little tighter and hoping she wouldn't choose to haunt him tonight while Abby was here.

Sometimes he woke up at night with the strangest feeling that she was screaming his name and begging for him to come. He'd pace for hours whenever that happened.

The fact that she didn't feel dead was another thing that didn't bear dwelling on because it made him worry he was crazy for real.

When Shanghai heard what he thought was Abigail's gentle footfall behind him, he deftly moved the steaks to one side and shut the lid. Then he turned around, hoping to take Abigail into his arms and steal a kiss. Not that her kisses needed stealing any more than Mia's had.

Abigail had a big job in Austin. She sold creativity, whatever that was. People came to her with ideas and she would invent concepts for them and name things so they could market their ideas. She was so successful that she had an apartment in Austin as well as the small ranch next to his.

Lucky for him she had a weakness for cowboys.

Abby had ridden over on her golden palomino, Coco, and had thrown herself at him right after he'd bought this place. She'd brought him a chicken casserole. Hell, hadn't he been running from females for just about as long as he could remember?

Shanghai... Mia's voice seemed to whisper from the trees.

When he turned, no one was there. Unless you counted the flying squirrel that leapt from his deck to the ground, he was the only mammal within shooting range.

He picked up his beer and took another long swig as the wind sighed in the pine trees. Then he grabbed a handful of the peanuts Abigail had set out and munched a few.

Mia was dead. Abigail and he were alive.

For a month, hell, ever since he'd bought the ring, he'd been trying to work up his nerve to ask Abby this one little question. His bull riding buddies thought this was as big a hoot as Wolf did.

"Damnation, Shanghai, you ain't scared of gettin' in a coffinlike chute with the rankest bulls professional rodeo can throw at you, but you're scared to ask a shy, blue-eyed, little girl to marry you," Matt had taunted him last night at the Stampede Bar while all their bull rider buddies had laughed.

"Consider her asked," Shanghai had said. "And her eyes are hazel. Not blue."

"Consider yourself hitched then. Your skinny ass is hers."

He'd thought of Mia, and his chest had tightened with aching regret.

The last light of the evening flared above the fringe of cedar, pine and oak along the fence line of Shanghai's Buckaroo Ranch, painting the sky until it was as bright as the flared match he'd used to light the gas grill. The air smelled sweetly of pine, which was a change for Shanghai.

Born and bred on the vast, hot, humid, mesquite-covered plains of south Texas near the Golden Spurs Ranch, it had taken a spell for this place he'd bought acre by acre with his rodeo winnings to feel like home, set as it was twenty miles south of Austin among Bastrop's lost pines. Not that he ever wanted to go back to south Texas. He'd given up his foolish plans for revenge a long time ago.

Other than his ranch, his rodeo buddies, Wolf and Abigail, he had no family. None at all. Family could cut you like nobody else in the whole damned world. When a boy was raised by a drunk who didn't even claim him, and he had a mother who'd run off, should it come as a surprise if the grown man didn't feel connected to his blood kin?

Not even to his brother? He hadn't kept up with Cole. He hadn't kept up with anybody.

Sometimes he felt a little guilty about Cole—mainly because he blamed himself more than he should have for the loss of Black Oaks. Still, Shanghai had decided long ago, he wanted nothing to do with his past and that included Mia.

He set his beer down. Where the hell was Abigail? Usually she was all over him by now.

Just like Mia used to be.

Don't think about her.

Impatient suddenly, maybe because he was so damn nervous at the thought of marriage—not that Abigail wasn't perfect—he stomped into his ranch house to find her. Finding the kitchen empty, he strode through his high-ceilinged den, past the glitter of twelve championship gold buckles. When he shouted her name, he was a little surprised that she didn't come running.

Curious now, but determined, because there's nothing like a chase to whet a man's appetite, he headed for the back of the house, thinking maybe she'd gone to the bathroom.

He frowned when he found the bathroom empty but saw a strip of gold glowing along the oak floor beneath his closed bedroom door. Curious, he pushed the door open. With a startled cry, she jumped from where she'd been kneeling beside his bedside table. The little velvet box with the engagement ring he'd bought for her spilled to the floor and glittered.

"Abigail?"

Her butterscotch-colored hair glistened in the lamplight. Her large, hazel eyes flashed with guilt. Flushing, she hurriedly crawled away from him on her knees toward his bed. Her shrink-wrapped white halter top and tight white jeans were way sexier than her usual clothes.

Not that he was in the mood to notice the way her breasts bulged so enticingly. He was focused on his ring that had rolled to a stop right in front of the pointed black toe of his alligator cowboy boot.

Slowly he leaned down and picked up the ring and velvet box. With a gasp, her frightened eyes lifted to his.

"Shanghai—I—I didn't mean... I—I was looking for a fingernail file." Her cheeks flamed.

"Sure." Even though he hated liars more than he hated snakes, he kept his voice soft. He slid the ring inside and snapped the lid shut.

"In the bathroom," he said tightly. "Second drawer to your left."

"What?"

"The fingernail file you were looking for."

"Oh...right."

Tossing the box into the drawer, he slammed it shut. "The steaks are going to burn if I don't go see about them." Feeling the need for air, he turned to go.

"You can't just walk out," she cried when he was nearly to the den.

"I'm hungry," he muttered, furious at her and at himself.

"Is that all you're going to say?"

"What the hell do you want me to say?"

"Don't you want to ask me...something?"

"No," he admitted in a glum, dark tone. "Not anymore. At least not tonight, anyway."

"Then when?"

“Don’t chase me, girl.”

“I—I’m sorry I—I searched your bedroom, Shanghai. I had no right...But, look, Matt told me weeks ago you bought the ring.”

“He wasn’t supposed to say anything!”

“I—I was just so curious and excited after he did. Then when you didn’t ask me, I kept wondering if you had another girl maybe in some other city. I started getting scared that maybe you’d given it to her.”

“I don’t have another girl,” he growled, stung. “You’re my only girl. Hell, if you don’t know that by now, we’re in big trouble.”

“Wolf said...”

“Who are you dating—me or Wolf?”

“He talks to me more than you do.”

“Then maybe you should marry him. I hear he’s between wives.”

Her eyes glistened. Her mouth was trembling. She was near tears and it was all his fault. She hadn’t done all that much. He was just ticked. He should take her in his arms and say he was sorry, but his chest felt constricted.

“I’d better check the steaks,” he said.

“Don’t you walk out of this room before we’re done.”

Sometimes Abigail had way too much spirit as far as he was concerned. She had lots of famous clients. He’d thought she was wild at first, but she had a serious, responsible side. Maybe that was why she made demands the girls he met on the road didn’t.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m done,” he said, stomping down the hall.

“Then maybe so am I. Who do you think you are? Oh, I know you’re a rich famous rodeo star, you can have your pick of women. But I’m the kind of woman who wants a guy, who wants only her. Maybe that sounds crazy to you.”

“I don’t think it’s crazy,” he muttered, but he kept on walking.

“You travel all over the country in your friends’ private planes or your souped-up truck,” she said, running after him. “You think you are hot stuff. Everybody’s always clamoring for your autograph.”

“Kids.” He turned. “I can’t say no to the kids.” Not when they came up to him with stars in their eyes and were almost too tongue-tied with awe of him to speak. “Big deal. I sign autographs.”

“Girls chase you, too. You don’t call much or write much when you’re gone.”

It was a fault of his, staying too busy to keep in touch.

“I don’t have to. You always call me,” he said.

“Yes. I do...because I thought you loved me.”

He’d thought so, too. “Hell.”

She raced in front of him, blocking the glass door.

“I’ve got a career, too. My daddy says I should marry a lawyer or a doctor...instead of some rodeo character.”

“Then why don’t you?”

“Maybe I will. Two handsome guys bought the ranch on the other side of mine. Connor and Leo Storm. Connor’s a cowboy. Leo’s a corporate type. Runs a big ranch in south Texas.”

“Go for Connor. He seems more like your type.”

Her eyes that were usually so adoring flashed with resentment. “I don’t want either of them.

“Did you take them a casserole, too?”

She flushed.

“I just wish you’d call me sometimes. Like tonight. Who called who first to set the time for dinner?”

“Who the hell notices stuff like that?”

“I do, Shanghai. My father was too busy saving the world to ever call me. In fact, he never paid any attention to me at all. I—I don’t have a brother...or a sister...” Her voice quivered. “When I marry, I want a strong, loving family...for a change. And a big part of the equation is going to be a strong, loving husband.”

“Hell.”

“Is that all you can say?”

He was getting into trouble with Abigail faster than when he’d caught his boot in the chute three nights ago, and the gate had opened on him before he’d been ready, and that monster, Tilly, had crushed his arm brace.

Love. Sometimes he thought the closest thing he’d ever felt to love was the applause he got after a winning ride. He’d take off his helmet and hurl it toward the sky. Then he’d throw his hands up in the air. There was nothing like the roar of his fans to make him feel big and important.

“Abigail...can’t we just eat....”

Shanghai—

There it was again!

Mia’s voice stopped him cold. He pivoted wildly, his eyes scanning the darkened hall for her ghost.

Her voice kept calling to him, like she was in trouble.

Shanghai!

“Do you hear anything?” he whispered.

She got a funny look on her face. “No.”

“Listen then.”

His gaze focused on the pine paneling. Crazy fool that he was, he felt so powerfully connected to her, he halfway expected to see Mia materialize out of nothing.

But, of course, she didn’t. His stupid, mixed-up brain and heart were playing tricks on him again.

“What’s wrong now, Shanghai?”

“Nothin’.”

This wasn’t the first time he’d felt Mia calling to him. When she was a little girl in trouble, she’d always come running to him. The instant she’d headed his way, he’d known she was coming.

She was dead. He had to get over her.

“Go away,” he whispered, not realizing he’d spoken aloud. “Get the hell out of my life!”

“Go away?” Abigail wailed, sounding truly hurt.

“Not you, honey,” he muttered in utter exasperation as he gazed forlornly down the empty dark hall.

He felt Abby’s arm on his sleeve, shaking him. “Shanghai, are you all right? You’re as white as your shirt. If you weren’t talking to me—then who were you talkin’ to?”

He stared down into Abigail’s inquisitive eyes, hoping they’d ground him.

“I asked you who you thought you were talking to?” she repeated.

“Nobody. Look, Abigail, forget it. I’m sorry I got all bent out of shape. The pace has been a bit much lately. Too many rodeos. Too many motel rooms bunkin’ with Wolf or the guys. Too many Bufferin along with the beers. My arm’s killin’ me. Let’s just forget the ring and this silly quarrel for now. Why don’t we just eat?”

“Who were you thinking of just then when you got that faraway look in your eyes? You do have another girlfriend, don’t you?”

“I was thinking about those damn steaks,” he muttered. “If we don’t get our asses out on that deck, they’re gonna be burnt to crisps.”

She leaned into him and pushed at his chest with both hands, shoving him toward the deck. “Go ahead then. I don’t care about your stupid old steaks! I don’t care about anything, not even you, you big lying lug! And you can flush that engagement ring down the toilet for all I care!”

“What I’d do? You were the one snoopin’.”

“If you loved me, you would have asked me already,” she said. “I wouldn’t have had to snoop.”

“I was going to ask you tonight,” he admitted.

“Then why don’t you?”

“Cause I’m not in the mood anymore.”

Her face went as white as his. “Well, neither am I.”

“You satisfied now?” he growled.

“Perfectly.” She crossed her arms over her breasts and ran down the hall.

Her quick, strangled sobs cut him to the quick because Abby wasn’t one to cry. He almost ran after her. Then his front door opened and slammed so hard his whole house shook.

He was halfway to the door when he stopped midstride. When her car didn’t start, he knew she was giving him time to chase after her. For some reason that he didn’t understand, his broad shoulders sagged, and he stayed put.

Suddenly Shanghai wished he was in a chute in a rodeo arena, his gloved palm tightly wrapped in a yellow rope, about to nod at the chute boss. He craved the excitement of the arena and the adrenaline-jingling moment when the gate swung open. He craved the fans’ shouts, the clanging bell, and the bull’s plunging jumps and wild snorts. He knew what to do when he was in a life-and-death battle to stay on a bull.

Bull riding was easy compared to women.

When Shanghai rode well, sometimes the bull and he became one. On nights he got it right, nothing else mattered, nothing at all.

After Mia had seduced him and then left him for Cole and then had the baby, Shanghai had told himself he’d gotten lucky again, that he was free, that he had his bull riding, his ranch, his horses and his rough stock. There had been plenty of women on the road to make him forget. Only the more women he’d used to forget her, the emptier he’d felt. Even after he’d met Abby, late at night he’d still feel lonely.

He’d ignored his loneliness and had told himself that when he retired he would marry Abby and be a rough stock contractor. He’d settle down and raise the best rank bulls in the business, the best saddle broncs, too. They’d have lots of kids, too. They’d be happy.

Shanghai... Again he felt powerfully connected to Mia’s ghost.

“Leave me the hell alone!” he yelled.

Mia’s voice cut him like a knife.

For a couple of seconds the house was quiet. Then his cell phone rang.

He picked it up and read Abigail in bright blue letters. It rang two more times. She was out in the car, calling him already. Inhaling a deep breath, he flipped it open.

“Hi, darlin’,” he said softly, feeling sorry for her somehow.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“You’re forgiven,” he whispered but in a tight, unconvincing voice. The fight wasn’t really her fault and he knew it. She always called and apologized.

“Are the steaks all burned up?” she murmured.

“If they are, I’ll take you out.”

“I have a better idea,” she said, her voice honey-soft.

He smiled in spite of himself. He knew exactly what she meant. She thought that if she got him in bed, she’d get him to pop the question.

She deserved better. He didn’t know what to say. Feeling doomed, he opened his front door and stood in the doorway. She came flying out of her car and into his arms.

But as his mouth closed over hers, he heard his name whispering in the pines.

Mia's voice sounded as small and scared as a frightened little girl's, and it tugged at him on some soul-deep level. She'd used that same voice when she'd pleaded for him to save Spot.

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