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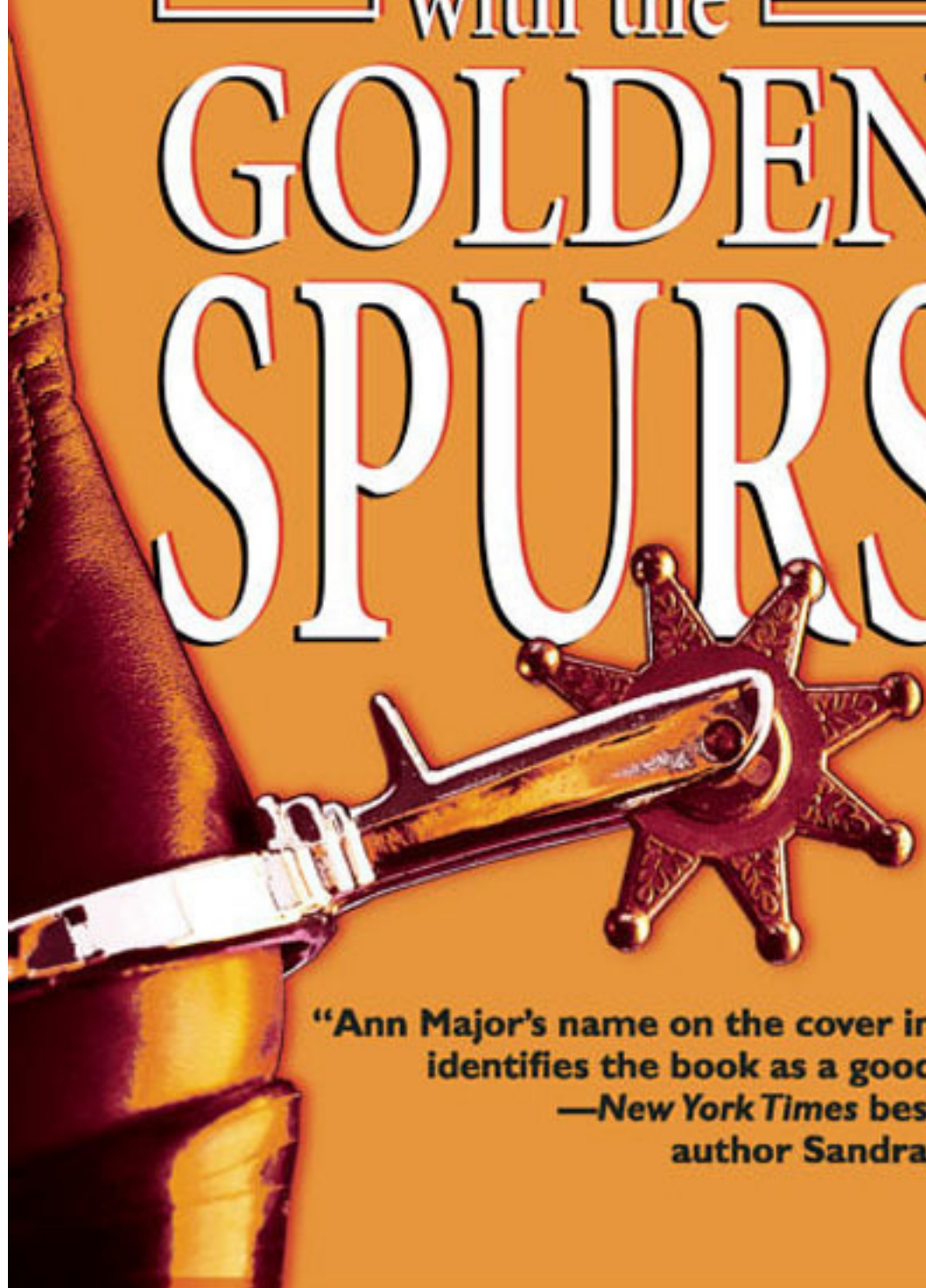
ANN MAJOR

THE GIRL

— with the —

GOLDEN

SPURS



"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 Spurs

«HarperCollins»

Major A.

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

From the cradle, Lizzy Kemble had the powerful sense that she didn't belong in her family's notorious Texas empire. Her desire for land-grabbing Cole Knight, embittered son of the neighbouring rancher, proved her right. Her daddy had done everything possible to turn her into a proper Kemble – all the way to leaving his vast Golden Spurs Ranch in her hands after he fell victim to a stroke. But when her father's death turns out to be murder, Lizzy knows someone is willing to kill to claim the Kemble wealth...and she's next on the hit list. With the Golden Spurs at risk, she's fighting back...but who is the enemy? The enigmatic Cole? Her cut-throat family? Caught in a high-stakes game of win, lose or die, Lizzy is forced to gamble her ranch, her heart, her very life for the truth behind the Golden Spurs. "No one provides hotter emotional fireworks than the fiery Ann Major." —Romantic Times

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Then she saw him – a real live Border bandit – lurking in the brush, staring holes through her, stripping her naked.

Just why she didn't weep or scream in terror, she'd never know. Maybe it's true what they say about curiosity killing cats.

Hunkered low over his saddle, the lone cowboy drilled her with such angry, laser-bright blue eyes, she knew he was bad. He had to be Cole Knight, one of the neighbours her daddy regularly cussed out. Even after he realised she'd spotted him, he didn't avert his predatory gaze or smile or even bother to apologise.

He was as bad as any bandit.

"I've heard all about you," she said. "You're known to have a nasty, vengeful disposition. You're a gambler, too, and you've got a bad reputation with girls."

"Did your daddy tell you all that?"

When he edged his mount closer to hers, she instinctively backed hers up. He smiled and let his hot, sinful eyes devour the length of her body. "You're not scared of me, now, are you?"

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THE HOT LADIES MURDER CLUB

ANN MAJOR

THE GIRL with the GOLDEN SPURS



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To all my soul mates out there, especially in Texas,
who wanted to grow up and become cowboys,
only to have their mothers warn them, “Make up
your mind, girl, because you can’t do both.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must thank Tara Gavin for her friendship, support, trust, talent and faith.

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And all my ranching friends who tell me stories – the Joneses, the Bateses, the Telleses, Becky Rooke and my aunt Mabel.

And Amber Maley, who works in the sheriff's office at Rockport, Texas.

And Lady Liddington, who was my best friend from junior high through university.

PROLOGUE

Smart Cowboy Saying:

Just 'cause trouble comes visiting doesn't mean you have to offer it a place to sit down.

—Anonymous

Prologue

The devil had dealt from the bottom of the deck one time too many.

An eye for an eye, the Bible said. Or at least Cole Knight had heard somewhere the good book said something like that. To tell the truth, he wasn't much of a Biblical scholar. But he loved God, he loved the hot, thorny land under his boots that by all rights should have been his, and he loved his family—in that order. He was willing to die for them, too.

Maybe that was overstating the case. In fact, Cole Knight wasn't much of anything. Wasn't likely to be, either. Not if Caesar Kemble and his bunch had their way.

But where was it written you couldn't kill a man on the same day you buried your good for nothin' father and set things right? Especially if that man was the cause of your old man's ruin? And yours, too?

Hell, it was about time somebody stood up and demanded justice. The Knights had as much right—more right—as the Kembles to be here.

Cole Knight *belonged* here. Trouble was, he didn't own a single acre. The Kembles had stripped him to the bone.

The feud between the Kembles and the Knights went back for more than a hundred and forty years. It had all begun when the first Caesar Kemble, the original founder of the Golden Spurs Ranch, had died without a will, and his son Johnny Kemble had cheated his adopted sister, Carolina Knight, out of most of her share. The Knights were direct descendants of Carolina Knight, whose biological father, Horatio Knight, had been a partner of the original Caesar Kemble. When Horatio and his wife had been killed in an Indian raid, Caesar had adopted their orphaned daughter.

As if being cheated hadn't been bad enough, four more generations of Kembles had continued to cheat and collude and steal even more land from the Knights. Not that the Knights were saints. Still, the Knights' vast holdings, which had once been even bigger than the Kembles', had shrunk to a miserable fifty thousand acres. Then worst of all, not long ago, Cole's father had lost those last fifty thousand acres in a card game.

Thus, Black Oaks had faded into oblivion while the Golden Spurs had become an international agribusiness corporation with interests in the Thoroughbred horse industry, the oil and gas industry, cattle ranching, recreational game hunting and farming. The Golden Spurs developed cattle breeds, improved horse breeds and participated in vital environmental research. The Kembles owned hundreds of thousands of acres and mineral rights to vast oil and gas reserves and were Texas royalty, while the Knights were dirt.

Cole had already been to the barn to saddle Dr. Pepper. No sooner had Sally McCallie, the last hypocritical mourner, waddled out of the dilapidated ranch house than Cole was out of his sticky, black wool suit and into his jeans and boots. A few seconds later his long, lean body was stomping down the back stairs into the sweltering, late July heat and the rickety screen door was banging shut behind him.

There was finality in that summertime sound. Thrusting his rifle into his worn scabbard, he seized the reins and threw himself onto Dr. Pepper. His daddy was dead, his bloated face as gray and nasty under the waxy makeup as wet ash, and Cole's own unhappy boyhood was over.

It was just as well. Not that he had much to show for it. He'd had to quit college after his older brother, Shanghai, who'd been putting him through school, had unearthed some incriminating original bank documents and journals, which proved Carolina had been swindled. When Shanghai had threatened to sue the Kembles, Caesar had run him off or so people had thought. His disappearance was something of a mystery. Shanghai had left in the middle of the night without even saying goodbye. Without Shanghai's help and with an ailing father to support, Cole hadn't had money to pay tuition much less the time to spend on school.

Twenty-four and broke, Cole was the last of the line and going nowhere. At least that's what the locals thought. Like a lot of young men, he seethed with ambition and the desire to set things right. He wanted the ranch back, not just the fifty thousand acres, but the rest of it, and there was nothing he wouldn't do to get it.

Too bad he took after his old man, local folk said. Too bad his brother Shanghai, who'd shown such promise as a rancher, had turned out to be as sorry as the rest of the Knights when he'd abandoned his dying father.

Cole felt almost good riding toward the immense Golden Spurs Ranch. Finally he was doing something about the crimes of the past and present that had made his soul fester. Partly he felt better because he couldn't get on a horse without relaxing a little. Cowboying had been born in him. It was as natural to him as breathing, eating and chasing pretty girls.

For the past three years, Cole had wanted one thing—to get even with Caesar Kemble for cheating his daddy out of what was left of their ranch and for running his brother off. Those acres weren't just land to Cole. They'd been part of him. He'd dreamed of ranching them with his brother someday.

Not that his daddy had given much of a damn that the last of the land that had once been part of their legendary ranch had been lost.

"Leave it be, boy," his daddy had said after Cole had found out the ranch was gone. "It was my ranch, not yours. Maybe Caesar and me was both drunk as a pair of coons in a horse trough filled with whiskey, but Kemble won Black Oaks fair and square with that royal flush."

"The hell he did, Daddy. The hell he did. You were drunk because he *got* you drunk. Caesar Kemble knew exactly what he was doing. What kind of fool plays poker drunk?"

"I'm not like you, boy. I play poker for fun." But his old man's explanation didn't mollify Cole.

"Black Oaks wasn't just yours. You didn't have the right to gamble it away. It was mine and Shanghai's."

"Well, it's gone just the same, boy. You can't rewrite history. You're a loser, born to a loser, brother of a loser. History is always written by the winners."

"I swear—if it's the last thing I ever do, I'll get Black Oaks back—*all* of it."

"You'll get yourself killed if you mess with Caesar Kemble. That's what you'll do. My father was a hothead like you and he went over to have it out with the Kembles and vanished into thin air. Don't get yourself murdered, boy, or run off, like Shanghai did."

"As if you care—"

His easygoing daddy hadn't cared much about anything other than partying and getting drunk.

With his Stetson low over his dark brow and longish black hair, Cole followed a well-worn dirt pathway through sandy pastures choked by huisache, ebony and mesquite. Dr. Pepper trotted for at least a mile before Cole's heart quickened when he saw the billowing dust from the herd rising above a stand of low trees like yellow smoke to dirty the sky.

The vaqueros and Kemble's sons, who worked for the Golden Spurs, had been gathering the herd for several days in the dense thickets that had once belonged to the Knights. Rich as he was, Caesar, who like Cole, loved cowboying more than he loved anything—including cheating at cards—would be out there with his men and sons. Cole hoped to catch him alone in some deep and thorny thicket and have it out with him once and for all.

Yes, sirree, that's just what he hoped until he saw Lizzy Kemble through the dense brush. Somehow the sight of the slim, uncertain girl on the tall black gelding struggling to keep up with the vaqueros and her younger, more able brothers, cousins and sister stopped him cold.

Lizzy was fair-skinned and didn't look like the rest of her family, who were a big-boned, tanned, muscular bunch—a bullying bunch, who thought they were kings, who lorded it over everybody else in the four counties their ranch covered.

The spirited horse was too much for her, and she knew it. Her spine was stiff with fear. Anybody could see that. Her hands even shook. She was covered with dirt from head to toe, and her hat was flat as a pancake on one side, which meant she'd already taken a tumble or two.

She might have seemed laughable to him if her eyes weren't so big and her pretty, heart-shaped face so white. She looked scared to death and vulnerable, too. Sensing her fear, the gelding was stamping the ground edgily, just itching for trouble.

Cole shook his head, ashamed for the girl and yet worried about her, too. What the hell was wrong with him? He should be glad Caesar Kemble's teenage daughter was such a miserable failure as a cowgirl.

He had a mission. He should forget her, but Cole couldn't stop watching her, his gaze fixing on her cute butt in those skintight jeans and then on the long, platinum, mud-caked braid that swung down her back.

Not bad for jailbait.

His former glimpses of her in town hadn't done her justice. She'd grown up some since then, gotten herself a woman's soft, curvaceous body and a woman's vulnerability that appealed to him much as he would have preferred to despise everything about her. It didn't matter that she was a Kemble, nor that the Kembles had been swindling the Knights for more than a hundred years. Something about her big eyes made him feel powerful and want to protect her.

He forgot Caesar and concentrated on the girl, who didn't seem like she fit with her clan at all. She was Caesar's favorite, and despite the fact she seemed the least suited to ranch life, the bastard wanted to make her his heir. All of a sudden Cole's quest for revenge looked like it might take a much sweeter path than the one he'd originally intended.

But then that's how life is. You think you're fixed on where you're going and how you'll get there—then you come to a tempting fork in the road that shows you a much sweeter path.

Lizzy Kemble, who was seventeen, had more important things to do than ride a horse all day long in this godforsaken, hot, thorny country—even if it *was* her family's immense ranch. And not on just any horse—Pájaro!

Why had Daddy insisted she could ride Pájaro? The horse had a bad reputation. Why did Daddy always have to challenge her?

“Challenges build character, girl.”

Daddy had the sensitivity of a bulldozer. You'd better do what he said or get out of his way.

Lizzy Kemble was tired, bored, saddle sore, sunburned and scared to death she'd fall off again. Not to mention her imagination was running wild. Every time she got lost in a thicket, she conjured some wild bandit up from Mexico or a drug runner lurking behind every bush just waiting to snatch her.

She wished she was home talking on the phone or reading a book. Why couldn't she have been born to a normal city family who thought it was natural to hang out in malls?

Indeed she wished she was anywhere except on this monster called Pájaro, getting her fair skin burned to a crisp and scratched up on thorns while she choked on dust and horse flies. Not to mention the bruises on her bottom. Pájaro had thrown her twice already.

She was thinking that Pájaro was a bad name for a horse because it meant bird in Spanish, and the last thing Lizzy, who'd been run away with before, needed was another horse that could fly.

The herd was deep in these horrible thickets made of thorns and cactus. She'd never been on this particular division of the ranch, and she hoped she'd never set foot on it again. Because the land here was too wild and rugged for pens or helicopters, the cattle simply melted into the thickets. Yes, Black Oaks was the only division where a real, old-fashioned roundup was still necessary.

If she had to do this, oh, how she wished she was on her gentle mare, Betsy! But Betsy had gone lame, so here she was trying to stay on this black monster with a wide chest and shiny-muscled

back, whose hooves tapped so lightly over the earth, she was gut sure that at any moment he would bolt or fly.

The thicket grew denser and Lizzy strained to find her daddy's sweat-stained, battered Stetson bobbing above the bawling herd. She saw Uncle B.B. riding tall, as handsome as a prince. Much as Lizzy wished she could give up and go home, she couldn't. Not with her black-haired brothers, Hawk and Walker, and her sister, Mia, who was a natural born cowgirl if ever there was one, making bets about the exact hour Lizzy would chicken out.

She was used to people regarding her with secretive, speculative glances when they thought she wasn't watching. She supposed they did so because everybody—her siblings, her aunts and uncles, even her mother—was jealous of her since she was Daddy's favorite. She hated the way her father's favoritism caused her problems on every level.

Hawk had said he'd give her an hour in the heat and thorns at best; Mia had said two. When Lizzy had heard Walker and her cousin, Sam—who never laughed at her—laughing, too, she'd made a bet of her own that she'd make it the whole day, even if every second of it was torture. Hawk and Mia had really smirked at her then, which was why she had to stick it out.

She'd show Hawk and Mia and Daddy, too. She'd show everybody, even Mother, who took such pride in Mia—she'd show them, she was a true Kemble if it killed her!

But even though she was Daddy's favorite, she didn't feel like a Kemble, and she never had. She often felt she'd been born into the wrong family.

On the Golden Spurs taking part in roundup was a sacred family tradition. Every family member was expected to participate alongside the hands. Even Aunt Nanette flew in from Montana to help work cattle and prepare the camp lunch. Of course, the lunch was always fancier than their normal fare when bossy, stylish Aunt Nanette took charge. She hired half a dozen caterers and had them flown in by private jet from Dallas.

For a hundred and forty years, Kembles had been working this land. They'd endured bandit raids, Union soldiers, drought, the Depression, inheritance taxes and now, in the twenty-first century, family dissention and constant lawsuits. They'd come close to selling out and giving up on the ranch dozens of times. Then oil and gas had been discovered, and there was too much at stake to sell out.

"As long as the family sticks together, the ranch will survive," was the family motto.

Being a Kemble was like being part of a football team or being a believer in a cult religion, or maybe it was worse, more like the Mafia, because it was family. There was a do-or-die feel to being a Kemble. You were supposed to feel your Kembleness in your bones, to dedicate your entire life to the ranch. Or you were the worst kind of traitor.

So Lizzy felt terrible that she'd been born with this weird feeling that she didn't belong here and that she lacked the talent to ever be a rancher. This lack in herself filled her with self-doubt. She wanted to please her father by becoming the perfect cowgirl more than anything, but she didn't think she ever could. As if he sensed this, her father, who was not normally intuitive, had done everything in his power to turn her into a proper Kemble.

"Keep your eye on me, honey," Daddy had said only this morning when she'd begged to stay home. "And you'll be fine."

Easier said than done. Daddy was everywhere at once.

The sun was a fat red ball low against the horizon, but that didn't mean her daddy would order the cowboying to stop anytime soon. She was tired of the hot rivulets of wet dust running down her face and throat. More than anything she wanted to wash her pale, curly hair so it was no longer matted with dirt and sweat. She'd been in the saddle so long, her butt felt numb and her legs ached. Her throat was dry from all the blowing dust. She probably had chiggers, too.

Nearby a calf escaped, and Hawk waved his cowboy hat and whooped at it. There was laughter and *gritos* as he and his terrier, Blackie, galloped toward the squealing calf in pursuit. Lizzy jumped forward causing Pájaro's hooves to tap skittishly.

“Easy, boy,” Lizzy said. Phobic about dogs, Pájaro danced backward. Tensing, Lizzy pulled back on the reins. She hated it when horses did anything except walk in a straight line. She’d been bitten, thrown and kicked too many times to remember, and that wasn’t even counting today.

It had all started on her fifth birthday when she’d begged Daddy for a doll, a beautiful Madame Alexander doll in a gorgeous velvet black dress, but he’d given her a dreadful Arabian mare named Gypsy instead. Daddy had told Lizzy the best way to make friends with the huge, snorting beast was to give her an apple. Only when she’d tiptoed fearfully up to the mare with the crescents of apple in her palm, the brute had snorted and then bitten off the tip of the little finger on Lizzy’s left hand. Mia had grabbed the apple and fed the beast expertly. Not that Daddy had even noticed her doing so.

At the plastic surgeon’s, Lizzy had cried and cried about wanting a doll instead of a biting horse. Not that her daddy had had the least bit of sympathy.

“Don’t be such a big crybaby, Lizzy. She knew you were afraid.”

How do you not be afraid when you are?

Ever since Gypsy, Lizzy had had problem relationships, you might say, with horses and cows—with any large animal, really.

But she loved her daddy. And her daddy was determined to make a cowgirl of her or kill them both trying. So, here she was, out in the blazing sun, in thorny brush country, getting herself all sore and sunburned to make her daddy proud.

“You were born to this life, honey,” Daddy was constantly saying, but there was always a lack of conviction in his voice that scared Lizzy deep down and made her wonder why he was trying so hard to prove she belonged.

Even though he took her everywhere, constantly instructing her about the operation of the ranch, somehow, she never quite felt a true kinship with the Golden Spurs. It was as if her life were a puzzle, and a big piece in the middle was missing.

“Why can’t I do the cowgirl stuff then?” she had asked him.

“Because you’re stubborn and you’ve made up your mind you can’t. Change your mind, and you’ll change your result.”

And so their discussions went, if you could call them discussions. Daddy, who never listened, always did ninety percent of the lecturing, and if she said anything, that just kept the unpleasant conversation going.

Sometimes she made small improvements in her horsemanship. But who wouldn’t have, considering how many hours had gone into her training? Sometimes she went for months without a mishap, but she always backslid.

No father ever spent more time grooming an heiress for the running of his empire. Before she’d been old enough for school, he’d carried her with him everywhere, whether on horseback or in his pickup or in the ranch’s plane. He’d taken her to San Antonio to the board meetings, introducing her to everyone important, who had anything to do with the ranch. He’d taken her to feedlots, to auctions. He’d let her play at his feet when he’d worked in his office.

Sam and her siblings had begged her father to take them, but almost always, he’d insisted upon Lizzy going because ranching came so naturally to the rest of the brood. He’d taught her to shoot and to ride, but she disliked guns and horses. The other children had watched her leave with her father for her lessons or trips, their eyes narrowed and sullen with jealousy....

One minute Lizzy was hovering on the edge of the herd, watching her daddy, mother, her uncles, cousins, brothers and her sister do the real work while she tried to stay out of their way and endured the blistering day. Then she saw him—a real live Border bandit...or maybe a drug runner—lurking in the brush, staring holes through her, stripping her naked.

Just why she didn’t weep or scream in terror, she’d never know. Maybe it’s true what they say about curiosity killing cats.

He was half-hidden in the mesquite and *granjeño* and palmetto fronds. Hunkered low over his saddle, the lone cowboy drilled her with such angry, laser-bright blue eyes she knew he was bad. Even after he realized she'd spotted him, he didn't avert his predatory gaze or smile or even bother to apologize.

No, bold as brass, his narrowed eyes roved from her face to her breasts and her thighs.

Rigid with shock and not a little fear, she glowered back at his harsh, set face.

"Who do you think you are—trespassing, spying on me?" she said, wishing for once that she was carrying a hateful gun like her daddy always advised.

"If your daddy wasn't a thief, you'd be trespassing, honey. This was Knight land for five generations."

English. He spoke English. Drawling, lazy, pure Texas English, but English. "So, you're Cole..."

Naturally she knew that Cole Knight was as bad as any bandit. Worse—if her daddy had his say.

Cole lifted his hat and nodded, his hostile, white smirk mocking her. "Pleased to meet you, darlin'." Not that he looked pleased.

She wasn't about to say she was pleased to meet him.

He had longish black hair, dark skin and radar eyes that saw through a girl.

"I've heard all about you," she said. "You're known to have a nasty vengeful disposition. You're a gambler, too, and you've got a bad reputation with girls."

"Did your daddy tell you all that, *little girl*?"

She refused to give him the satisfaction of admitting it, but she felt herself get hot and guessed her blushing was telling him more than she wanted it to.

"Cole Knight is set on revenge against me, honey," her daddy had told her, and more than once.

"Why, Daddy?" she'd asked.

"Oh, no reason. Just because he's an ill-natured cuss if ever there was one."

"So, you're Lizzy Kemble," the handsome, ill-natured cuss drawled lazily in that pure-Texas accent of his, bringing her thoughts back to the present.

When he edged his mount closer to hers, she instinctively backed hers up. Again he smiled and let his hot, sinful eyes devour the length of her body, taking liberties she'd never given any man—and certainly didn't want to give the insolent likes of him.

He stared until she was practically frothing with fury. Then he shot her another bold smile that made her skin really heat.

"You blush real easy, don't you, *little girl*? I like that."

"Well, I don't like it, and I don't like anything about you, either," she snapped.

"You barely know me."

"I know enough."

"Then why don't you run, *Little Red Riding Hood*?"

"Go away. Just go away!" she said. "Before somebody sees you here."

"You've seen me. Aren't you somebody?"

Before she could stop herself, "I don't count for much around here."

He laughed at that, and some of the strain and anger left his dark face. He was handsome—too handsome for his good and for hers, too, she suddenly realized. This was bad. She wasn't as immune to his charm as she needed to be.

"I know that feeling...not counting for much," he said, his voice low and beguilingly gentle now as he urged his big horse to sidle closer to hers. He tipped his hat back, so that she could see his beautiful, long-lashed eyes better. "It's an awful feeling, isn't it?"

"I've got to go," she said, studying the silky length of his lashes rather too fixedly.

"You're not scared of me, now are you, *little girl*?"

"No! Of course not!"

“Then stay. Relax. I’m not the big bad wolf. I’m just your neighbor. Maybe it’s time we got better acquainted.”

She was about to say no, but Blackie charged through the brush, yapping his fool terrier head off at a rabbit that was running for his life. Panicked at the shrill barks, Pájaro reared slightly.

When the rabbit and dog sprinted toward the gelding like a pair of bullets, Lizzy screamed, and Pájaro started bucking for all he was worth.

“Keep your head, girl, and quit your screaming,” Cole yelled, moving swiftly toward her.

Lizzy hollered again and again.

“Hush,” Cole ordered, trying to grab her reins.

“Get away!” she yelled, slapping at his hands with them.

Then Blackie rushed under Pájaro’s hooves again, and the gelding tossed his head wildly and reared. Cole grabbed the reins just as Pájaro bolted. The reins flew out of his hands, and Lizzy clutched the saddle horn and the gelding’s mane and held on.

Born to fly, Pájaro’s hooves pounded the earth as if ten demon terriers were chasing him straight to hell instead of one small dog. Lizzy was equally spooked. No way could she stop screaming now.

Pájaro dashed straight through thorny brush—through mesquite, huisache and *granjeño*, racing for the middle of the herd. Lizzy clung desperately, fighting to hang on. If she fell, she could be trampled. Behind her, she heard Cole shouting instructions, but the cattle were bawling so loudly, she couldn’t make out what he was saying.

Ahead she saw a low branch, so she bent low over Pájaro’s back. When he raced beneath it, thorns knocked off her hat and shredded the back of her blouse. Pájaro shot through a bunch of cattle, scattering them in all directions. Then he veered away from the herd back into the brush, racing at a full gallop for maybe five minutes.

Her heart was thudding in terror, but still she held on. If anything the monster sped up. The man on the horse behind them seemed to be catching up, which made Pájaro even wilder to outrun them.

Tightening her grip on the saddle horn and the coarse hair of Pájaro’s mane, somehow she endured the wild, thundering chase. Suddenly Cole and his horse were racing right beside her.

“Let go!” a hard voice yelled. “I’ve got you.”

Let go? Was he crazy?

Even when she felt Cole’s powerful arm around her waist, her knees gripped Pájaro’s flanks and she held on to the saddle horn for dear life. But her strength was nothing compared to Cole’s, who yanked her off with seeming ease.

Her hands were ripped off the saddle horn, and for a fleeting horrible second she was airborne between the two flying horses. Pájaro veered to the left, and Cole pulled her in front of him on his horse.

“I’ve got you,” Cole repeated over and over against her ear.

Panic tightened her stomach even as Cole pressed her tightly against his body as he reined in his mount.

“There. You’re okay. You’re safe,” he muttered between harsh, rasping breaths as the thudding hooves slowed. “You’re okay.”

“I want down. I don’t care if I have to walk all the way home, I don’t want to ever ride a horse again.”

“That’s understandable,” Cole said soothingly.

“This is all your fault! You shouldn’t have chased me!”

“Then I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” he said in that same calming tone.

Her daddy would never have been so reasonable. When she fell off a horse, he always hollered or used a stern voice to order her back on.

Cole dismounted and helped her down. Still, terrified, her heart continued to race as he circled her waist with his hands and lowered her from the horse. When he continued to hold her, she was so upset, she lacked the sense to push him away.

Her choked breaths erupted in burning gasps. Her knees were so wobbly she could barely stand, and her eyes burned with unshed tears. She was scared and too mortified for words.

“I—I probably look a mess.”

“There now,” he said. When he drew her close, she forgot her fear of him and clung. He was breathing hard and fast, just like she was. But he was holding her gently, caressing her and letting her cling.

“If you want to know, that scared the hell out of me, too,” he said.

“I’m not scared.”

“Then maybe you wouldn’t mind loosening your hands just a little. Your fingernails are slicing little hunks out of my back.”

“Oh... Of course...”

“You’re so much braver than me,” he whispered reassuringly. “If anything would have happened to you...”

A callused fingertip caressed her muddy cheek as he pulled a twig out of her dusty curls.

Never before had she been babied when she was afraid, and even though she knew she should push him away, she couldn’t let go of him even when she stopped shaking. It was simply too pleasant to be soothed and comforted by someone so strong and solid...and nice.

She didn’t care what Daddy had said about him. Cole Knight had saved her life, and he was so *nice* he wouldn’t make her ever get on a horse again if she didn’t want to. He had a gentle voice, and he smelled real good, of leather and spice and his own clean male sweat. He didn’t seem to mind that she was so dirty.

Cole was a full head taller than she was, and the skin above the top buttons of his white shirt was way darker than hers, and his hand that slid against the bare skin of her spine where her blouse was ripped into shreds was way rougher than hers. He was old, much too old for her, probably at least twenty-two. Old, and too experienced with girls. Worst of all, her daddy hated him. Still, he was...nice.

Finally they both got their breath. She glanced up at him, thinking he’d release her. But he didn’t, and somehow that was unbearably exciting.

She tilted her head a little to better study the mystery of Cole Knight, not that she could see much more than the sensual line of his mouth and his hard jawline. Still, he had a nice, kissable mouth. The mere thought of her lips against his caused a violent shiver to dart through her stomach.

How could she be attracted to him?

She wasn’t. It was just that she’d nearly died. Cole had saved her. Maybe it was only natural to feel some temporary affectionate bond with a man who saved your life even if he was your natural born enemy.

Cole bent his head and stared down at her lips with the same scary, burning intensity she remembered from the thicket, only now, her heart skittered faster.

The wind was warm on her face, but his stillness and watchful silence as he held her caused butterflies to dance in her stomach. Her heart was beating so fast it felt like it might burst. She’d never come close to such a wild dark thrill as Cole Knight, never dreamed of it even.

Until this moment, in his arms, she’d been a child. Even before he lowered his face to hers, she lifted her lips and parted them, half-hoping he would be as bad as people said and steal a kiss from her.

Instead his mouth grazed her cheek so softly she could barely feel his breath. Still his gentle kiss left her aching. Without thinking, she wistfully traced a fingertip across her mouth. His eyes watched her, and maybe they dared her. Before she even knew what she was doing, her fingertip left her lips and traced the shape of his.

His mouth was hard and warm. Just touching him there had her body thrumming and sent heat through her like a lush wild wave. Her other hand inched up his wide chest and flexed around his neck. Then with an unfathomable yearning that bordered on pain, she pushed her innocent body into his, until her breasts were flat against his hard chest.

“Oh, God.” He groaned, sucking her fingertip inside his lips for a moment before his black head dipped closer to hers. “You smell sweeter than the sweetest rose.”

She stood on her tiptoes, hoping, aching for more.

It was worth nearly getting killed on a horse—well worth it—to be here like this with him.

The moment went on and on, endlessly. Just when he might have kissed her, a horse with Lizzy’s daddy on its back thundered out of the brush. When a swarm of her relatives followed, shouting and cursing, Cole pushed her away from him.

Caesar pulled his stallion up in front of her, his face purple as dust whirled around them.

“Lizzy, what in the hell are you doing?” Caesar’s horse thrashed closer. “Get away from that devil, girl!”

Uncle B.B.’s handsome face was as stern as her father’s. Even Aunt Nanette and her sons, Bobby Joe and Sam, who were Lizzy’s age, looked grim and unforgiving.

Lizzy lifted her chin and stepped in front of Cole to shield him from her family. Not that Cole was the type to cower behind a woman even for a second. He seized Lizzy’s hand firmly in his and swung her along beside him.

Oh, how she liked his doing that. Standing beside him gave her a new confidence, and she squared her shoulders. To her surprise, her voice was quiet and level, a woman’s voice. “Daddy... he saved my...”

Her father’s bushy, amber eyebrows snapped together as he stared at her fingers knotted in Cole’s. His lips thinned as he hunched forward in his saddle.

Lizzy recognized the signs his temper was on the rise and, removing her hand from Cole’s, nervously rubbed her bare arms, which were sunburned and bloody with scratches. Tatters of her blouse fluttered against her exposed rib cage.

“Daddy, he didn’t hurt me. He didn’t tear my blouse. Mother—he saved my life.”

As if mortified by Lizzy’s conduct, Joanne looked away.

Caesar’s blazing eyes remained fixed on Cole. “*You, boy!* Yes, Knight, I’m talking to *you!* *You* get the hell off my land!”

“You stole this land, Kemble. You and yours. You drove my brother away! But you can’t bully me.”

“*You* stay away from my daughter!”

Cole smiled lazily. “Well, I’d say that’s more her choice than yours, wouldn’t you?”

Cole’s gaze softened as he regarded her, and Lizzy felt herself melting like hard chocolate on a hot stove.

“Of all the impudent—” To his men Caesar roared, “Boys, throw this damn trespasser off my land!”

“My land!” Cole snapped.

When Kinky Hernandez, Daddy’s loyal foreman, along with half a dozen vaqueros, materialized out of the thicket, Cole’s expression darkened. His low voice was hoarse, almost a growl, as he reached out and squeezed Lizzy’s hand one last time. “Maybe you’re not calling all the shots anymore, old man.”

“He’s right, Daddy! Leave him alone! I’m all grown up! You can’t tell him or me what—”

“Get on your horse, boy—”

Cole whistled, and his big horse trotted up to him like a trick horse in a rodeo. Before he swung his long leg over his saddle, Cole glanced down at Lizzy with another hot look and a smile that cut off her breath and filled her with unbearable joy.

He tipped his hat to her. “See ya ’round, little girl,” he said in that gentle tone that mocked her father and made butterflies fly in her stomach.

“See ya,” she whispered, bringing her fingertips to her lips, unable to say more, not even goodbye.

Dismounting, her mother slipped up beside her. “If you’re smart, you’ll forget you ever met that no-good scoundrel,” she said. “No telling what he would have done to you if we hadn’t—”

He would have kissed me...maybe. The thought made Lizzy ache.

“He’s the son of thieves and ingrates—troublemakers and gamblers, the whole lot,” her father asserted. “I ran his no-good brother off a few years back when he threatened to sue me, and I’ll do the same to this one—if you don’t leave him the hell alone.” He drew in a savage breath at Lizzy’s dazed expression. “Take her back to the house, Joanne. Talk some sense into her.”

Lizzy barely heard them. She was too busy watching Cole ride away, too busy wondering if she’d ever see him again.

Even when her mother took her by the arm, she turned her head, still watching the spot where she’d glimpsed the last of his broad shoulders.

“Forget him, girl. He’s a Knight and you’re a Kemble. He doesn’t want you. He wants our land. And he’ll do anything—he’ll use you in any way—to get it. He wants the ranch—not you!”

Oh, if only, if only she’d listened.

BOOK ONE

Smart Cowboy Saying:

Letting a cat out of the bag is a lot easier than putting it back.

—Anonymous

One

Eleven years later

South Texas

The Golden Spurs Ranch

Pawing and snorting, hooves clattering on concrete, Domino exploded out of the barn as if a dozen of Satan’s meanest horse flies had flown up straight from hell and stung him on his powerful rump.

“Whoa, boy! What’s lit into you?”

It was late April. The last of the wildflowers sweetened the warm air that smelled of grass, cattle and horse.

Caesar Kemble leaned back in the saddle and pulled in on the leather reins. “You’re mighty anxious for our morning ride, aren’t you, fella? More anxious maybe than me. Which is saying one helluva lot.”

A few yards away in front of the blazing sea of wildflowers that surrounded the vast ranch house, dozens of spurs sparkled like golden Christmas ornaments in the branches of the thin-leafed, thorny mesquite tree.

Caesar scowled. “Damnation!”

To some, the tree was a pretty sight against the glow of the sky this time of year, but he hated that tree. Hell, he should have cut the damn thing down years ago. Trouble was, the Spur Tree had stood there for more than a hundred years and was part of the ranch’s tradition. Not that the spurs had anything to do with something as joyous as Christmas. They represented loss and pain and death and suffering—but courage, too. When a man or a woman left the ranch, their spurs were hung on the tree.

It had taken a lot from a lot of men to hold on to this ranch. His daddy’s spurs hung there. So did Jack’s, his oldest brother’s.

The tree was more than a tree. It had a strange power, more power than most churches. Many a time Caesar had watched a vaquero who was feeling low come and stand in the shade of the Spur Tree for a spell.

Caesar lowered his Stetson to avoid looking at the tree. He was king of these million acres that bordered the Gulf of Mexico on the east and spread out to the west, at least he told himself he was. And he ruled with more authority than many true kings governed their kingdoms or generals commanded their armies. From his birth, there had always been people trying to steal his empire from him.

Jack, his older brother, had been the golden boy, the heir apparent, Daddy's favorite, until he'd broken his damn fool neck in a fall off a bronc in the dunes near the bay. Nobody had ever crossed Jack. Nobody had ever dared say maybe Jack should have had better sense than to ride off alone on an animal like that in the first place.

Coming to power after Jack's death, Caesar had become a helluva lot more spoiled than Jack had ever been. He was used to being obeyed—instantly. Just like Jack, he hated being crossed. Maybe that was the reason that thorny tree stabbed such a big hole in him. His enemies weren't just outsiders.

Children—you thought they were yours—until they committed the unforgivable crime of growing up and showing you different.

He'd had such grand plans for his children, especially Lizzy, his first, *his* favorite. She'd been born a mere hour before Mia. Oh, but how he'd reveled in that small victory.

Free-spirited, softhearted urchin that she was, Lizzy had attempted a defiant grin when she'd slung her spurs at the tree. Yes, the memory of her slim shaking fingers tossing those spurs before she'd left for New York was burned into his soul like a brand.

The crybaby in the family had dared to stand up to him. First by loving that no-good Cole. Then by leaving.

Nor would he soon forget the rainy afternoon of Mia's memorial service three months ago when he'd hung his second daughter's spurs on a branch beside Lizzy's while Mia's husband, Cole, yes, Cole, fifty vaqueros and five hundred mourners had watched. Joanne, who never cried, had sobbed beneath the Spur Tree, while Lizzy, who was ashamed of crying and too wary of Cole, had watched from the nursery window while she rocked Cole's fretful, month-old baby daughter, Vanilla. After the plane crash that had left Mia dead and Cole so dazed he couldn't remember people, not even his little daughter, Lizzy had come home for a while.

For the first time, she'd helped Caesar run things. She'd been surprisingly adept at dealing with the books and figures and computer work. Just when Caesar had begun to get used to having her around, she'd left again.

Yes, sir, the mere sight of that tree was enough to make his temple throb for hours. Ignoring the pain in his head, he jammed his own spurs against Domino's flank and yelled, "Giddyup, boy!"

Horse and rider flew until the Spur Tree was well behind them.

Both daughters had fallen for the same ruthless, vengeful man. Now they were gone for good—one dead and one simply foolish, irresponsible and ungrateful. And he still had Cole to put up with.

Lizzy had damn near gutted him alive by leaving Texas. As if his little girl, who could barely sit a horse, could make it in the cold cruel world without him pulling strings.

I'm all grown up now, Daddy. I'm twenty-three. I've got a college degree. It's time I left home.

You're a big grown-up crybaby, that's what you are.

He'd said that because she hated the fact that she had a soft heart and wept more than most girls her age. Then he'd gone for the guilt button.

You can't leave your daddy now that you're old enough to be of some use to him around here for a change—after all the trouble you've put him to raising you—

Lizzy, who'd been more trouble than most kids, had kissed him on the cheek as he'd turned away from her and said a tear-choked goodbye. *I know I'm a crybaby. I know I was trouble, but I have to grow up sometime. And, Daddy, you were trouble for me, too.*

If only she'd been born a boy. Maybe everything would have been different. Why couldn't she have been more like Sam, his nephew? Hell, for that matter, why couldn't Hawk and Walker have

been more like Sam? Sam had loved the ranch so much he'd moved in with Caesar when he was ten and still lived on the ranch, although no longer in the main house.

His sons, Hawk and Walker, were a worthless pair for sure. He'd never been as close to them as he had to Lizzy. Neither of them gave a damn that he'd built an empire for them. Although they were as different as night and day, if he advised or corrected one of them, they stuck together. After Caesar's recent quarrel with Walker over the artist he'd chosen to do the murals depicting ranch life for the new Golden Spurs museum, Walker had stormed out in a huff. Hawk had followed suit. Who knew where they were keeping themselves these days. And even the board had sided against Caesar, as well, and the painter had stayed.

Now Caesar had his sons' responsibilities to see about in addition to his own. They'd been in charge of organizing the grand opening of the museum and the celebration of the ranch's 140th anniversary, which were scheduled during Thanksgiving week.

The whole thing was ridiculous. Because of various crises the ranch had faced recently, the board had trumped up the museum and celebration to restore faith in the ranch's name. There would be tours, lectures, a big party and a horse and cattle auction during the week-long festivities. Caesar had thought the celebration was ill-timed to say the least, especially since it would be during a holiday, but he'd been outvoted by the family and the board.

If Hawk could just walk off, maybe Caesar could, too. Maybe it was time he did what the damn bunch wanted and turned the ranch over to the smart-ass suits in San Antonio. Let them come down and run the ranch and this ridiculous celebration they'd dreamed up.

But if he did, the ranch would go to hell in a handbasket. Sam, for all his talent, didn't look at the big picture. The board would diversify into more profitable business ventures than cattle. They wanted the Golden Spurs name on cattle equipment, hunting vehicles, leather goods and guns. They were interested in farming and government subsidies and environmental research, but not a single one of them was a real rancher.

"Times are changing faster than you are, Dad," Walker had yelled at him before he'd left.

The board—and even Sam—had made him furious when they'd told him the same thing.

But, hell, had any of them been named rancher of the decade?

Caesar had a cell phone clipped to his wide belt and a phone number in his breast pocket. The girl that went with the phone number was an exotic dancer in Houston. Last Saturday night he'd watched her perform a wanton cowgirl routine on stage with a real live horse.

She was nineteen—younger than his kids and nephews, but old enough, well worth the hour-long plane ride from the ranch. She had implants, big hair, fake eyelashes, but there was nothing fake about those legs of hers that went forever or the megawatt smile she'd flashed him or the promises she'd made with her big blue eyes and soft hands when she'd gotten off her horse and had done that lap dance wearing a silver, sequined cowboy hat and not much else.

He thought about Joanne and the cold, loveless years of their marriage. Maybe it was time he hung his own spurs on the tree and kicked his heels up, too. It had been a while since he'd had any fun with a woman.

He pulled Cherry's number out of his pocket and memorized it. Then he put it back and grabbed his cell phone. His body heated as he leaned forward and nudged Domino with his spurs.

The gelding's walk was a wonderful kind of tap dance. Domino was the best horse Caesar had ever had, a real genius.

It was only nine in the morning, and already the temperature had to be in the high eighties. But that wasn't why Caesar felt as hot as a billy goat in a pepper patch.

Should he call her? He stared up at the deep azure sky unmarked by clouds and felt beads of perspiration pop out on his forehead. It would get way hotter, and so would he.

He punched in her number, and a recording answered. He waited a few seconds, before he got up the nerve to stammer hello.

A woman's soft voice interrupted and said, "Hi there—"

His big hand shook so hard, he punched something and broke the connection. Then he cursed himself for being such an idiot.

Thank God he'd hung up on her. Gulping in a breath, he attached his cell phone to his belt again.

Heartbreak and grief and disillusionment were supposed to age a man, but Caesar knew he looked and felt much younger than he was. Maybe it was all the hard, physical work he'd done on top of the constant mental challenge of running his empire.

Not *his* empire...the family's...and it was a big family, not just his immediate family...a difficult family with more than a hundred members... Which meant there were a lot of calves sucking off a single tit, which meant the ranch had to produce.

The ranch had been established during the first half of the nineteenth century, turbulent years in south Texas. Land in Texas had gone from Spanish rule to Mexican rule to the Republic of Texas rule to American rule and then to Confederate and then back to Union rule in the space of sixty years. During this period of chaos, land titles and old Spanish land grants had been the original Caesar Kemble's for the asking... or as some said now...for the stealing.

Not that the ranch had been easy to defend even back then. Mexican bandits had marauded constantly and stolen cattle. Northern cattle markets had been uncertain. Drought had plagued the ranch, until a constant source of water had been found.

Through all the disasters, generation after generation had bought land and never sold. The challenges in modern times were no less formidable than they had been during frontier times.

The Golden Spurs was constantly being sued. Only Caesar's love for the land had sustained him through these rough and challenging times.

Not too long ago, a lowlife thief had trespassed on Golden Spurs property to steal gas pipes. He'd used a blowtorch to cut the pipe into movable sizes. The pipe had had a little gas in it and had exploded. The injured thief had sued for damages.

Caesar had blown his stack when the plaintiff's attorney had grilled him on the stand. As a result the thief had walked away with a huge settlement.

Ever since, his lawyers worked hard to keep him out of the courtroom. Under tough questioning, even after hours of tutoring from his attorneys, he couldn't be trusted not to speak the truth as he saw it.

So, he stuck to what he was good at—ranching. Cowboying had never been work to him. He'd given the ranch and his family his best years. Not that fifty was old. Still, it was an age when a man thought about his purpose and his legacy, especially when he'd made a helluva lot of sacrifices and had asked others to do the same—and they hadn't.

All his children and his nephews wanted was the money. Right now they were pestering him for a bigger share of the mineral revenues.

As if they needed more money. Oil money was like play money to them. They bought anything their hearts desired—mansions, foreign luxury cars, airplanes, jewels. The money had made even wimpy little Lizzy confident enough to strike out on her own and try to prove she was somebody.

What the hell was that all about? New York? Crazy town. Too far from Texas. Too many people. City people. None of them with a lick of sense. He'd talked himself blue in the face, trying to get her to come home, but she was as stubborn as her mother.

You were somebody the day you were born, girl. You were born my daughter, he'd thundered yesterday morning when he'd called her.

But, Daddy, that doesn't mean anything.

It means a helluva lot to everybody in this state but you.

That's just the problem. I don't deserve to be famous or rich. I didn't do anything. And you... you're always saying I'm wimpy....

I never ever say that, baby girl.

You do! When you're mad, you do!

Then it's time you saddled up and changed all that.

I wasn't born to be a cowgirl. It's either born in you, or it's not. At least that's what you always said, Daddy.

Hell, was your smart-mouth kid throwing your own pearls of wisdom back in your face?

What the hell's wrong with you? You grew up on a ranch! I taught you everything I know!

Don't you see, this is why I had to go? I can't live my life—with you bossing me around all the time. With you trying to make me into something I'm not. I want to make you proud, Daddy—my own way! I'm not a cowgirl! And I don't want to be rich!

Well, you are. If you marry out of your class, he'll either want your land or your money!

Like Cole, Daddy? Is that what you're saying?

Yes, like Cole, damn it!

Not that Cole was quite as ornery as he'd been before he'd married Mia. Since the plane crash, he'd been annoyingly easy to deal with. There wasn't a more talented cowboy on the ranch. Most of the hands worked in pairs to trap the worst of the bulls that had gone wild, but, hell, just like Caesar's brother Jack, Cole rode alone. He understood bulls, understood their natures. He knew the exact second they'd turn and charge. And he was ready. Not that Caesar ever praised Cole aloud.

As for his own kids—not one of them appreciated what Caesar had done. Not one of them wanted to do an honest day's work. Of late he'd begun to wonder if any of what he'd thought was so damn important mattered at all.

Had all the years he'd spent teaching Lizzy about the ranch and the business been a waste? From the moment she'd been old enough to sit in his lap, he'd taken her with him on mornings when the work would be light. Many an afternoon he'd ridden home with her limp and sunburned in his arms.

He'd hired the best riding teachers, bought her the best rifles. He'd sent her to A&M and forced her to study ranch management, refusing to pay for another major, refusing to listen when she'd said she wanted to study English and be a writer.

Her brothers and sister had been jealous, wanting to know why he spent so much more time on her than the rest of them. The reason was a secret that Caesar hoped he'd take to his grave.

Lizzy wasn't doing all that great in Manhattan. As always, Caesar had his sources. His kids couldn't keep anything from him.

She'd be back. Damn it, she'd be back.

When Caesar was out of sight of the imposing white, red-roofed ranch house, he pulled in on the reins and let his gaze sweep the flat, coastal pasture. The sea of brown grasses seemed to stretch endlessly, but that was an illusion, as much in life is.

He frowned, not that anything was amiss with the brush-choked creek or the prickly pears along the barbed wire fence or the herd of cherry-red cattle grazing placidly. Or with the black buzzards lazing high above him on an updraft.

A red fox stood still in the distance, watching him warily from the edge of oak trees. Caesar breathed deeply, liking the rapport he felt with the wild fox as much as he liked the smell of the grass and the feel of the warm wind against this cheek. After a minute or two the fox scurried back into the thick brush.

Once Caesar had felt safe and confident here, safe in the knowledge that he was in charge, that his kingdom was secure for future generations. No more. The world was changing too fast and there was no one in the litter he trusted to follow him. The ranch and what it stood for was threatened on all sides.

Besides, the family wanting more of the oil and gas money, every month was a new challenge. The Golden Spurs wasn't just a ranch. It was a global, international, multifaceted, family-owned corporation that had diversified into other businesses, and it had to compete globally. The suits in San Antonio and an uppity, younger CEO, Leo Storm, constantly tried to dictate to Caesar.

Not that the problem that had been eating at him ever since Jim, his lawyer, had called last night was global. Another group of local jackals, distant kin of Cole Knight, had discovered yellowed copies of the same documents Shanghai had shoved in his face years ago, claiming the second generation of Kembles had stolen from their adopted sister. Just like Shanghai, the greedy bastards had had the effrontery to call his great-great-granddaddy a betraying thief and a liar, and, thereby, claim not only a large section of the ranch but all the royalties earned on the oil and gas the ranch had pumped out of the ground for the last sixty years—plus interest.

But what really galled Caesar was the fact that the lawsuit was the result of a tip from someone in the family, who'd leaked secret information from the ranch's sealed archives. Walker? Cole maybe?

Cole was at the center of a lot of the recent crises, and yet that very fact made Caesar suspect it was someone else. Cole had married himself square into the family. He was Vanilla's father. He owned considerable stock in the ranch.

If not Cole, it was damn sure somebody.

Who the hell was the traitor?

Caesar was mad, so spitting mad he had one of his headaches. His ancestors would have fought their enemies with six-shooters. But in these new days, killing came at a price. Thus, this was a problem for his high-priced, fast-talking attorneys.

"If anybody calls you, just refer them to me. Act reasonable," Jim had cautioned him just this morning.

"Act reasonable?" he'd thundered. Not that he'd said much more. Jim cost too much. Billable hours, he called it.

Since Jim had assured him there was nothing he could personally do about the problem except make it worse, Caesar had come out here to give himself an hour or two to settle down. He could have driven the pickup, but he preferred to ride Domino when he needed to get himself together. There was a purposefulness to the sounds of hooves on the ground and the movements of Domino through the grasses.

He was glad he'd escaped Joanne. One look at his face and she would have grilled him for sure. She saw too much. She wanted things from him he couldn't give. Besides, she could have been the one who leaked the information.

Funny, he hadn't realized how demanding she'd be when they'd struck their deal and he'd agreed to marry her. He'd thought she was meek and mild. He'd thought she'd be easier.

Caesar was staring across the thorny brush country beneath the hot blue sky when his phone rang. Expecting Jim again, he yanked it off his belt.

"Hi, there." The voice was soft and breathy, and before he could speak, his armpits were damp and his body burned as hot as a smoldering tree stump.

"How'd you get my number?"

"Caller ID, big boy. You called me a while ago. Am I right?" She giggled. "Now don't be shy. Guess what I've got on."

Not much, I reckon. He imagined Cherry in bed, young and voluptuous, naked, with her long white wavy hair flowing over soft pillows. He imagined her breasts and her pubic hair, which she'd told him she'd died hot pink.

"Hot pink... just for you," she'd teased. "And I shaved it into the shape of Texas. Wanna see?"

"Hi, there back," he said, feeling excited and yet easier, too. "So—what are you wearing, honey?"

"Not much more than a burning bush." She laughed.

He envisioned fluffy coils of hot pink hair shaped like Texas and laughed, too.

"I didn't think you would ever call me," she said.

A beep cut into their conversation. "Damn," he muttered. "Gotta get this."

"Don't hang up again," she pleaded.

“I’ll call you right back.”

“Bye. But don’t be too long,” she cooed, a pout in her voice. Then she blew him a kiss.

He clicked over to the incoming call, cursing the timing.

A strange, disembodied voice broke up amidst too much static.

He jammed the phone against his ear, trying to get the gist of what the man, if it was a man, was saying.

Two words stung him like poison. *Dead. Electra.*

His heart beat dully as he remembered a girl with long, pale curls lying underneath him, her hair looking like ripples of moonlight on a dark, boiling sea. More images were burned into his brain and heart. Electra running, her long legs so graceful. Electra smiling, her lavender eyes as intense as lasers. Electra, laughing, always laughing, Electra, wild, beautiful, incredible Electra, his love.

“She can’t be dead,” Caesar said. “Who is this?”

“Dead,” the terrible voice confirmed.

Caesar gripped the phone tight in his fist. “Then how? Where? Who the hell are you?”

“Nicaragua,” the caller said without identifying himself.

Electra was a damn fool. He’d told her to stay out of hot spots like that. She was nearly forty-eight, old enough to know better. Funny, when he thought of her, she was forever young. She always looked young when he saw her pictures in the newspapers.

Forty-eight was too young to die. How many times had he warned her about those countries? He’d even gone down to Columbia once and rescued her when she’d gotten herself kidnapped.

“How? How did she die?”

“Did you know she kept a journal...so she could write a book? An intimate tell-all?” Laughter.

Caesar remembered the way she used to sit up at night, writing with the lamp shining on her blond curls. Just like Lizzy. His head began to pound. His throat was so dry he couldn’t swallow.

“She wasn’t a virginal, saintly heroine, was she? Any more than you’re the legendary, responsible Texas hero. Or the faithful husband. You ever wonder who else she slept with...or how you rate?”

Hell, yes, he’d wondered. “Bastard! Who the hell are you? What do you want?”

More laughter. “She wrote about you. Did you know that? Does Lizzy know who her real mother is?”

“What the hell do you want?”

“The world is full of shortages. You have so much.”

“Who else have you told?”

“Nobody...yet.”

“How did she die?” he repeated.

Laughter. “In her bed.”

“How?”

“The bitch got what she deserved. Other people you love will die, too, if you don’t release more of the oil and gas revenues to the rightful shareholders.”

So the bastard had killed her. Moreover, *the lowlife wanted money. Everybody always wanted money.*

Caesar had no doubt he was talking to the traitor.

A warrior’s scream rose inside him, like the screams of cattle in a burning barn. He must have made some sound because vultures exploded out of nearby oak tree and circled slowly, as if he were a stricken creature.

“You won’t be around forever, old man. When you’re gone, whatever will happen to Lizzy?”

Caesar cursed. Then pain, the likes of which he’d never felt before, burst inside his head. His right hand lost its grip on the leather reins, and he cried out.

The pain subsided as quickly as it had come, as it always did. Other than feeling curiously empty as if a part of himself was gone, he felt all right. It was nothing, he told himself. Nothing. He’d had

headaches all his life. He was too young for it to be anything serious. Just in case, he pulled an aspirin out of his pocket and chewed it, swallowing the bitter taste.

“Who are you? Who the hell gave you this number?”

Laughter. Peals of it. Then the line went dead.

He had no idea how long he sat in the saddle thinking about Electra, wondering what had happened to her, before the phone rang again. Quickly he answered it.

“Hi there. I got worried when you didn’t call right back.” Cherry’s voice was soft and friendly, but he couldn’t talk, couldn’t say anything.

“Hey, big boy, are you there? Are you okay?”

Caesar cleared his throat and tried to focus. “I can’t talk right now.”

“I’m sorry.” She sounded genuinely sympathetic. “So, do you want to get together?”

He didn’t answer. That he was even considering cheating on Joanne with a woman like Cherry had to be a sign that the tremendous strain he’d been under was taking its toll.

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea,” he said. “Look, I shouldn’t have called you—”

“You won’t be sorry,” her low, sultry voice promised. “I swear. I think this is fate. Your name starts with C—my name starts with C. I looked up your birthday. You’re a Taurus and I’m an Aquarius.”

What the hell did that have to do with anything?

“I’m free...late, every single night,” she whispered, “after I finish dancing. We could unwind... after a long day. I’m off all day Sunday, and I never go to church. Get your cowboy son-in-law or his pilot to fly you up here again.”

“You’re awful sure of yourself.”

“*You called me,*” she said.

He remembered Electra and his wild passion for her that had lasted even until now. Sorrow, not lust, gripped his heart.

“You called me back—twice. Don’t chase, girl. If I want you, I’ll do the chasin’. Frankly, I’m not in the mood.”

“Ohhhh!” She sucked in a breath. “Go to hell. Go straight to hell.”

When she slammed the phone down so hard she made his ear pop.

She was a pistol.

A woman like her could take a man’s mind off his worries. His sorrows...

All things considered, he had half a mind to call her back.

Two

Six months later

Manhattan,

Upper West Side

The cell phone rang just as Lizzy made it up the concrete stairs outside her brownstone with baby Vanilla. Golden leaves fluttered on the trees that lined her street. Not that she paid much attention to the afternoon’s beauty.

She was too preoccupied at her front door as she buzzed Bryce, her present live-in, who didn’t answer. When he didn’t, it was panic time.

Bouncing her fidgety niece up and down instead of searching for the phone, Lizzy hit the buzzer again as waves of uneasiness washed over her. Her brother, Walker, was visiting them. Why wasn’t he home?

Lizzy hated the way she overreacted to everything, but when Bryce didn’t answer, butterflies whirled in her stomach. Not good butterflies, either.

Lizzy had been trying to make her mark in Manhattan for over five years. She’d started out as a cat-and dog-sitter and then a nanny. Next she’d read manuscripts for her landlord, who was a publisher. But when she’d passed on a couple of shallow novels that had turned out to be bestsellers,

her landlord had suggested that she stick with cats and dogs and children. Lizzy was in television production at the moment, but like every other job she'd had here, she wasn't as good at it as she was at dog-sitting. Her boss, Nell, had said, "You didn't really acquire...an...er...broadening...education on the university level, now did you? Besides that, you don't get New York or our audience."

Lizzy's love life hadn't been a roaring success, either, at least not until Bryce. Yes, she had high hopes for Bryce—he was part of her fantasy. A successful woman, at least a woman with a drop of Texas blood in her, always had a man to share her success with. Okay, so for her, the right man had come before the right career.

Lizzy's fantasy was also to be a beautifully groomed, kick-ass career girl, somebody with short, smooth, glossy black hair instead of long, platinum corkscrew curls. She wanted to be a real live heroine with a fantastic wardrobe; a fighter, who might get knocked down, but who could always joke about life's little upsets with snappy, sexy one-liners.

Lizzy most certainly did not want to be somebody who didn't even get jokes half the time, even dumb blond jokes, or somebody who was tongue-tied, shy, repressed and riddled with self-doubt. Most of all she did not want to be a crybaby.

Heck, maybe she should see a shrink again, but that would be admitting she was still a mess.

The phone in her purse stopped ringing.

Love means letting go of fear.

Why had that particular pearl from some dumb pop-psychology book she'd read on the sly sprung into her mind at this exact second? Was it true? If it was, had she ever really been in love?

She'd been crazy-lovesick over Cole, but there had been a darkness in him she couldn't reach. And that had scared her. Maybe that's why she'd finally let Daddy convince her to break up with him. No, the real reason was he was pure country, and since she was no good at any of that, she was determined to be a big-city career girl—not to mention the fact that all Cole'd ever really wanted was a piece of the Golden Spurs.

The phone in her purse rang again and each ring got louder. This time she managed to get the thing out and up to her ear—no easy accomplishment since she was juggling the baby on her hip, her briefcase on one shoulder, a diaper bag as well as her purse on the other, while holding her door keys and buzzing Bryce, too.

"Did I call at a bad time?" her mom asked in a faint, lifeless voice as Lizzy got the big doors unlocked.

"G-great time, Mom," she lied, looking up at the staircase that vanished into the darkness long before it even reached the third floor where she lived.

"How's Vanilla?" her mother asked softly.

Lizzy could hear her mother's white fantailed pigeons cooing in the background, which meant her mother must be in their coop, tending to them. She knew her mom had more on her mind than the baby, but the baby was a safe topic. Hopefully Mom wasn't going to rehash her dad's betrayal and the impending divorce and settlement.

What had gotten into Daddy six months ago?

Sex. Pure raw sex. Bryce had said this in that definitive, annoying know-it-all, male tone that drove her crazy and made her doubt herself—and him—in the wee hours of the night.

Men want more sexual partners than women. Everybody knows that, honey. And more juice...

More sexual partners? Juice? I, for one, didn't know that. Is that what you want, Bryce?

Lizzy hated being caught in the middle of her parents. In the past she'd never been close to her mother, who used to be stern and strict and so in control. Now her mother called her in the afternoons, and her father called her every morning, each wanting *her* to reassure *them*.

This morning her father had called before her alarm had even gone off, and he'd sounded anxious.

"You have to come home, damn it."

And really be caught in the middle? No, thank you. “I was just there. I’m still playing catch-up. I do have a life here, you know.”

“If something happens, promise you’ll come home.”

He was anxious. “Daddy, what’s wrong?”

“Just promise, damn it.”

Both her parents wanted her home. They were living on separate floors of the house and driving each other crazy. They didn’t understand about her impossible job at the television station or about Bryce, who wanted her all to himself.

“Bring him to the ranch,” her father had bellowed.

Not yet. Not yet. Guys changed when they realized who she was.

When they realized how rich she was.

“Bring him to the museum opening,” her father had insisted.

In less than a month the Golden Spurs would celebrate its birth with the opening of a ranch museum. Her parents along with Walker, who’d been the ranch archivist, had hired designers, artists and a sculptor. Before Daddy had quarreled with Walker and Walker had quit, her parents had worked on the project together. Since Cherry had entered the picture, her mother had done most of the work on the museum opening alone.

While the museum and the celebration weren’t generating the headlines the board would have liked, her daddy’s six-month affair with Cherry and her parents’ divorce were the talk of Texas. As soon as possible, her father, a high-profile rancher, who’d once seemed so sane and stolid and respectable—if overbearing—would be free to marry Cherry Lane, the stripper he’d met in a saloon in Houston where he’d gone with other cowboys for a night’s entertainment.

“You’ll love Cherry when you get to know her,” her father had actually had the gall to say once.

Right. A girl who’d tipsily showed a reporter her big diamond ring on her twentieth birthday and bragged she’d bleached her pubic hair silver in anticipation of her honeymoon, saying, “I want to be virginal for him,” couldn’t be all bad.

Lizzy hoped the only thing she and Cherry had in common was the pale color of their hair. If Cherry quit coloring hers, they wouldn’t even have that.

Lizzy wasn’t beautiful, or at least she didn’t think she was. Nor did she enhance her perfectly proportioned features with layers of heavy makeup and bright red lipstick the way Cherry did. People never said she was pretty. What they said was she had an open, friendly face.

Naturally slim, Lizzy would probably stay that way since she ate mostly vegetables—it broke her heart to think of killing animals for food. She also ran in the park every morning before work because she missed grass and trees more than she wanted to admit. Unlike Cherry, she had small breasts with no plans of enhancing them even if Bryce had made a comment or two.

She knew she should cut her long pale curly hair and attempt a more sophisticated style, but the shorter she cut it, the frizzier it got. So she still tied it back in her cowgirl ponytail.

Of course, she’d intended to learn about fashion when she came to the city. But because she loved roaming the streets of New York on Saturday, she shopped for her clothes at fairs and secondhand shops instead. Thus, with her wild hair and mismatched outfits, she looked more like a gypsy than the sleek career woman of her fantasy.

“How’s Vanilla?” her mother repeated in a louder voice, interrupting Lizzy’s thoughts.

“Sorry, Mom. My mind was somewhere else.” She patted Vanilla’s diaper. “Your granddaughter is as heavy as a sack of wriggling lead!” Lizzy hiked up her long blue skirt and started up the stairs.

“She made me laugh. I shouldn’t have let you take her—”

“You were too tired, what with everything that’s been going on... You needed the rest.”

“I just laze around and spend way too much time with the hatchlings. I’m always missing meetings that have to do with the museum.”

“It’s called depression, Mom.” Lizzy’s behavior had been similar to her mother’s when she’d first come to the city. “You should see someone...talk to someone.”

“My little birds are so darling. I can’t get packed or meet with the museum sculptor about doing a bust of your uncle Jack. I can’t do...” Her voice faltered.

“You need to talk to somebody.”

“This whole thing—I—I don’t know what’s wrong with me. All I seem to do is spend time with my gentle birds. They’re so angelic and lovely.”

No use to tell her mother what to do. Her mother never listened any more than Lizzy listened when people told her what to do. Her mother hadn’t asked about Walker, so Lizzy didn’t mention him.

Lizzy paused on the first landing. Mia’s pregnancy and sudden, rather mysterious marriage to Cole, followed by her tragic death nine months ago that none of them had been able to handle, had been the beginning of a landslide of terrible events. Was it any wonder her mother couldn’t face moving out of the house where she’d raised her family to let someone like Cherry move in?

“How can a ten-month-old feel heavier than a brick?” Lizzy said aimlessly.

“Give my plump little pumpkin head a kiss—”

“Don’t you dare call her that. Besides I’m panting too hard to talk and climb and kiss her at the same time.”

“Where’s Bryce?”

Her heart thumped. She thought, *Good question*. She said, “He should be home any minute.”

By the time Lizzy reached the third floor of the brownstone with Vanilla, she was truly breathless. Something in her mother’s voice made Lizzy’s too-imaginative mind whirl with the sinking feeling that something really was wrong between Bryce and herself.

Fool that she was, Lizzy had told her mother having the baby here for a month would be fun. Too bad she hadn’t asked Bryce first. Vanilla had been here a week, and he was sick of her.

Vanilla clapped when she saw the tall oak door to their apartment. Her latest trick was to clap when she was pleased. Usually Lizzy clapped and laughed, too. It was one of their games. As Lizzy fumbled for her keys, Vanilla quit clapping and began to squirm.

“Mom, did you call me for a special reason?”

“No....”

“Everything’s okay?”

The pigeons cooed in the background. Her mom said, “It’s just the waiting—”

“You’ll be fine. The worst is over.”

“But I have to leave my home.”

“It’s hard, I know, but you’ll adjust. You have to. We all do. I love you, Mom.”

“I wish you’d come home.”

Guilt stabbed Lizzy. “I will, when I bring Vanilla back. Right now it’s pretty hectic at work. My boss, Nell, keeps the pressure on. I can’t seem to do anything right. She keeps pulling my stories.”

“Quit. You don’t have to work.”

And do what? Lizzy bit her lips and swallowed as she remembered Nell telling her nearly the same thing only this morning. Lizzy swallowed again. “Look, I’ll call you—”

“No, I’ll be fine. You don’t need to call.”

Feeling even guiltier, Lizzy said goodbye. When she pushed the door of her apartment open, Vanilla’s big blue eyes widened, and the baby clapped again. Lizzy kissed her forehead and dark curls. “Gran’s missing you. That big ol’ rambling ranch house is mighty lonely without you and Dad and Mia...and me, I bet.”

Lizzy nuzzled Vanilla’s soft hair. Even after a long day at day care, Vanilla smelled baby sweet. *Cole’s daughter.*

Don’t think about him or how changed he is.

Inside the gloom, Lizzy's gaze fixed on the card sitting on the table. On the cover was a leather-clad girl with black wings, standing in a doorway with the words *Dark Entry* above it. Lizzy frowned.

How had that thing gotten back into her house, anyway?

At the office earlier, when Nell had challenged her research—and chewed her out in front of everyone when she'd been unable to defend it to Nell's satisfaction—Lizzy had wanted nothing more than to run home and lie down or play with Vanilla. Suddenly Lizzy felt worse to be here at home.

Dark Entry? Maybe she was overreacting. This was simply an invitation to a Halloween party. Probably something Bryce wanted to go to and she didn't, a thing to be discarded like before. But just looking at it gave her that nagging feeling that she was caught in some strange force field and trouble was brewing.

Swimming in a pool of red light, the picture of the girl in the bondage costume with the black wings seemed to glow like an evil spirit. For no reason she remembered that Bryce had bought her a black teddy, boots, handcuffs, and a whip—gifts she'd stuffed into plastic containers with the rest of the suggestive lingerie he'd given her and stored at the very top of her closet.

Lizzy clutched Vanilla tighter. *Don't think about any of it. You're too tired. Nine hours in the television station.*

Only to have Nell humiliate her and cancel her story. Lizzy needed to work tonight. But how? The baby was turning out to be more effort than Lizzy had imagined when she'd offered to give her mother a break.

And Walker? Why was her brother in town anyway, acting like he was ashamed every time she asked him what exactly his quarrel with Daddy was about? All week she wondered why her brother had chosen this week, of all the confusing weeks in her life, to finally visit her.

Work had been tough lately, and she and Bryce had been at their worst. Bryce, who never watched television, had sullenly slumped in his chair every night, watching sitcoms he normally despised, ignoring everybody.

She dropped her briefcase, the diaper bag and her purse onto the oak floor in the entryway. Lizzy drew a breath, but the air in the apartment felt dense and stifling.

Lizzy didn't like the new little fears tearing at her any more than she liked thinking about her mom. Lizzy blamed herself for what had happened to her parents. If she hadn't abandoned them in her quest for a perfect life here, if she'd taken an interest in all Daddy had tried to teach her, maybe they wouldn't be on the verge of divorce.

She frowned. Her life here *was* perfect. Or rather it was going to be—so she told herself every morning when she lay awake beside Bryce, their bodies apart on their separate sides of the big bed. She would lie there, doing her affirmations, listening to the city sounds outside her window. After the Texas quiet, even noises like sirens and the clatter of garbage trucks were delightful to Lizzy because they reminded her she was really here—in New York.

She'd escaped. She had a glamorous exciting life and the perfect man to share it with.

Why couldn't she forget about the invitation? Because she didn't understand what it could be doing there—again—on top of a week's worth of mail on her small doornside table.

The same identical invitation had come last week. It was for a Halloween party tomorrow night. She hadn't known the person who'd sent it, so she'd torn it up without showing it to Bryce. And what was wrong with that?

Okay, so the thing had been addressed to Bryce, too. But she was the one who did her mail promptly while he left his for months. People had to call him, to demand money or ask him if he was coming to some event, before he would fly at his stack, agitated and accusatory that he had to deal with it. Someone had obviously called him about the invitation and re-sent the thing.

No way was she going to a party like that!

Lizzy felt a fresh stab of guilt as she considered Bryce. The party-giver must be a friend of his. Was Bryce now sulking as he had after she'd told him about the baby?

“Your family,” he’d said in a tone of complaint when she’d called from Texas to tell him she was bringing Vanilla back with her.

“Yes, my family,” she’d agreed. “There’s nothing I can do about them.”

“You were down there for two months after Mia died.”

“When you meet them you’ll understand.”

But would he? She’d been attracted to Bryce because he was so different than they were. He didn’t have to dominate everybody in a room. Average in both height and build, he was quiet, reserved and contained. He didn’t make demands on her all the time.

Except about the lingerie.

Lizzy drew more quick breaths as Vanilla began to clap excitedly. The invitation, like the lingerie stacked in containers in her closet, threatened Lizzy in some strange way.

She grabbed it, intending to wad it up, only to have Vanilla reach for it, too, squealing delightedly as she began to nibble on it and bat her long lashes up at her aunt. Tug-of-war was a favorite game of hers and Cole’s.

Cole... Lizzy’s heart thumped in her throat again as she remembered how changed he seemed when she’d last been home. Surprisingly, he and Daddy were actually working together without much of their former friction. Cole had even ridden along with her and her father when her dad had shown her the new state-of-the-art hunting camps and bragged about their corporate clients. Her dad had credited Cole with obtaining the leases.

“No, darling,” Lizzy admonished gently, prying the card from her tiny fingers. “Nasty. Garbage.” She chucked the wet invitation into the trash can even as she was swept with a guilty feeling for doing so.

Again, she told herself that she and Bryce were perfect together. Bryce was from the country. She was from the country, but they’d both craved more excitement, so they’d escaped to *the city*.

He was from Indiana, a dull farm where nothing ever happened. She was from a huge ranch in south Texas with a fabled history that was like a kingdom unto itself where too much happened. Like all kingdoms, its challenges ruled its owners more than the owners ran the kingdom.

People like her father and mother and Cole were obsessed with land, with its being *more* than land; obsessed with duties and loyalties to the land and to each other. Lizzy knew that somehow the land had ruined her parents’ lives and maybe her sister’s. She was terrified it would consume her, too.

She hoped New York was far enough away for her to be safe from its pull. She loved being able to lose herself in crowds. Here, she could be a nobody or a somebody. Here, nobody was jealous of her. She could be whatever she wanted to be. She wasn’t destined to be anything. Here, the name, Kemble, meant nothing.

Holding the baby, who was watching her face expectantly, Lizzy sagged still a moment longer against the wall in her entryway. Her weary gaze took in the cardboard books, stuffed rattles and bottles scattered about the floor of the living room and second bedroom, as well as her own closed bedroom door.

Vanilla smiled at Lizzy and clapped her hands together again to divert her.

“You’re glad to be home, aren’t you, precious? You want to get down and crawl.”

Lizzy cuddled her closer and brought her cheek against the baby’s. How was it that Vanilla, her precious little niece, was already such a true little soul mate? Why couldn’t Bryce just enjoy her, too?

“But why didn’t you ask me?” Bryce had said during that phone call she’d made from Texas to tell him her baby-sitting plans.

“Because I knew you’d understand. Mother can’t face the divorce. She needs to pack. It’s only for a month.”

“A baby—for a whole damn month! Why can’t her father... What the hell’s his name?”

“Cole... Knight...”

“Right. Why can’t Knight do his part for once?”

“I told you...he was hurt in the plane crash. He’s not himself—He doesn’t remember...her.” She’d hated the way her throat had closed when she tried to talk about Cole. “This is something I have to do.”

“Well, maybe I don’t!” Bryce had banged the phone down.

She’d been terrified until he’d called back and apologized. “It’s just that I wanted you all to myself—like before. Like the first night.”

Like the first night. She was embarrassed by that memory. Until that night she hadn’t known how lonely she’d been away from home, nor how desperate she’d felt to connect with someone... anyone. She’d been like a cat in heat, wanting Bryce. Not that she’d given into her need that first night.

But he’d known. “You want it bad, baby. As bad as I do,” he’d said as they reached the front door to her apartment building. “Let me come up.”

Later, several weeks later, when she’d finally let him, she’d wanted him with the same ferocity as that first night. She’d let him make love to her again and again, seeking something from his male body, warmth, love, a sense of belonging... something to make her feel she belonged here... and yet...

She remembered getting up alone afterward, going to the window, staring out into the night for hours, listening to the city that never slept, still wanting... something... as she’d listened to him snore. When he’d awakened that morning, he’d wanted her again, and she’d given herself too enthusiastically, wanting to prove—what? That it had all meant something? That he really was as perfect as she wanted to believe?

Suddenly something heavy crashed in her bedroom.

Bryce? Had he ignored the buzzer when she’d rung from the street? Hadn’t he heard her come into the apartment? Why hadn’t he come out?

Frowning, she walked to her bedroom door and pushed it open.

His eyes wide and startled looking, Bryce gaped at her from the middle of her bedroom. Behind him two big black suitcases lay open on top of her new glittery, orange Indian bedspread. Empty plastic containers that had previously held Bryce’s ties and cuff links, along with all that lingerie that she’d stored on her highest shelves, littered her Oriental carpet.

She gasped. When her gaze flew to a black garter belt lying by the bed, Bryce, who was usually calm, tensed. Hostile, bright gray eyes flicked over the baby. Then he flushed and sighed heavily, clamping his lips shut determined to say nothing. She drew in a breath.

So, it was up to her, she who could never speak up at meetings. Her throat went dry, and the first words seemed to stick there. “Y—you’re not leaving—”

“Don’t start in on me— Look, I’m sorry— I hoped to avoid this—”

So, it was over. Just like that.

The realization slammed through her before she stopped all thought. Vaguely she was aware of Vanilla clinging even as the baby’s bottom lip swelled in infantile disdain for this tense, cruel giant.

If only she, Lizzy, could feel such instinctive disdain at Bryce’s betrayal, but she felt—if you could call it feeling—only paralyzing numbness and inadequacy. He was abandoning her just as her father had abandoned her mother.

Lizzy was bleeding to death, only the blood was invisible. Their perfect life together was over. She had tried so hard. *Too hard maybe.*

“Where are you going?” she finally whispered, not wanting to have this conversation in front of the baby.

Bryce was dragging his designer Italian suits out of her closet. For no reason at all she saw Cole, his face white, beneath a brilliant azure sky on that awful long-ago afternoon when she’d broken up with him.

Cole didn’t matter.

Bryce stared at her and the baby and then hurled his suits on the floor with such violence Vanilla hid her face against Lizzy's throat. When the baby peeped at him again, her bottom lip was huge and her big blue eyes suspicious.

"Is it the baby?" Lizzy whispered.

Bryce slammed the lid of his suitcase down.

"It's only half-full," she said when he made no answer.

Suitcase latches clicked. "Do you think I can pack—*now? With you here?*"

She kept her voice low so as not to frighten Vanilla. "Is it because I don't want to go to the party? Because I don't dress sexy...because I don't wear that...that lingerie?"

When Vanilla began to whimper, Lizzy soothed her. "It's all right, darling. It's all right." She swayed back and forth with the baby resting on her hip.

"Hell, yes, it's the party. You tore up the first invitation. It's a lot of things." He glared. "Do I have to spell it out for you?"

Like the beginning of all relationships, theirs had been mysterious and wonderful, so wonderful they hadn't asked questions. They'd met in a bar. She'd been out with girlfriends one Thursday night. Everybody had been talking to everybody, but the place had been loud and crowded, and Lizzy, who wasn't any better in crowds than she was at business meetings at work, hadn't felt like talking to anybody.

Until she'd noticed Bryce watching her.

He'd joined their table. He'd been as cool and confident as she'd been riddled with self-doubt. Her friend Amanda had known one of his friends from Princeton. Then somebody had said something funny. Bryce and she had both laughed when nobody else had—as if it were their own private joke. And she didn't get jokes usually.

He'd bought her a drink. Their hands had touched accidentally. She'd felt a spark. He'd gone still at the exact moment she'd yanked her hand from his.

When relationships end, women no longer want the mystery. They want answers. Why is that?

Nothing was ending. This was a mistake. If they could only talk or have sex, they would sort it all out. But they hadn't had sex. Not for a while.

She stared at the red tie dripping from his closed suitcase. "I—I want to know what's wrong."

"When we met, you were so exciting. You even dressed differently."

"And now I'm boring?"

His gray eyes drilled Vanilla. "I'm going to that party—alone."

"Because I'm boring?"

"You never wanted to talk about it before. Why now?"

"When the baby leaves— When Walker leaves—"

"I thought you were wild...free...exciting. But you have this whole family thing."

"They're in Texas."

"They call all the time. Not to mention half your tribe is living with us."

"So—you think I'm boring—in bed and out of it." Careful to keep her voice low, she stroked the baby's hair.

"Don't make me say things I don't want to say." He looked past her. "I'll come back for my things later—when you're calmer."

"I am calm." She measured out the words very carefully, her eyes glued to the point of the red tie sticking out of his suitcase.

"But your eyes are wild."

You said you wanted wild.

From the bed he picked up a dark rectangular object about the size of a book. Carrying his black suitcase with the red tie flapping, he strode toward her only to stop and place the rectangular object on the dresser next to where she was standing. "I found this in your brother's things."

“You went through Walker’s things?”

“I was packing, looking for my stuff stored in his bedroom.” He stopped. “Oh...” His eyes changed, and he let the word hang ominously. “Nell called, too.” His smug expression filled her with dread.

She froze. “Nell?”

“I told her I wouldn’t be here to give you her message, so she called back and left a voice mail for you.” He swallowed.

“You listened to it, didn’t you? You’re leaving me, and you listened to *my*—”

“Maybe now isn’t the time to listen to her message.”

“What does that mean?”

“Wait until you’ve had a good night’s sleep. That’s all. Don’t watch that video, either...not until you’re feeling stronger.”

“Video?” Too much was being thrown at her. Vaguely Lizzy realized the black rectangular object he’d placed on the dresser was a VCR tape.

“I’m strong!”

Bryce stalked past her with his bags, his long legs carrying him through the apartment to the entryway, out the door. When his footsteps thudded down the stairs, Vanilla looked at her, a tentative smile beginning at the edges of her cherubic mouth. Then the doors three floors below boomed shut behind him, and Vanilla clapped.

“Oh, Vanilla, you are a little rascal,” she said numbly.

Vanilla smiled, and Lizzy tried to smile, too, but her lips were quivering too much.

“I’m not a weak, softhearted wimp.” Lizzy reached for the cordless phone on the dresser, intending to listen to her voice mail tonight. She could take anything this city and Nell could dish out. She could. Gently she set Vanilla down and got her a container and a lid for her to play with.

Lizzy had six messages. Nell’s was the last. It was short and sweet; well, not sweet.

“I’m sorry to do this over the phone—Liz. I should have told you today. I meant to.” A drumbeat pounded in Lizzy’s throat. “I should have told you before you went to Texas. It just isn’t working out... You’re too young. Your viewpoint is too softhearted and naive for this city. You don’t do the kinds of stories we do. Your research is sloppy.”

“What? What?”

Nell’s voice hadn’t stopped, but Lizzy’s mind went blank. When she could think again Nell’s brisk voice was saying, “...budgets cuts. I have to let you go. Your severance check will be ready first thing tomorrow. My assistant put your things in boxes. You need to turn in your security badge.”

“What? Boxes! No! No...”

Lizzy listened to the message a second time, but that only made the horrible words cut deeper.

Slowly she hung up the phone and picked up the videotape and turned it over in her hands. Vanilla had abandoned the container and lid and had crawled into the living room, over to her green couch. Pulling herself up and patting the cushions, she looked over at Aunt Lizzy, waiting to be congratulated on her accomplishment.

Aunt Lizzy was probably white as a sheet. “Darling, that’s wonderfu—” Her voice broke. Babies were so self-confident when they faced their challenges. They didn’t quit.

Lizzy was shaking too hard to speak. Still holding the videotape, she gulped in a breath. Then she went to the couch and sank down beside Vanilla, hoping to draw strength from her.

“Darling, darling, what would I do if I didn’t have you?”

Blue eyes sparkling, Vanilla grinned at her impishly.

Lizzy fought back hot wet tears. She wasn’t going to cry, and she wasn’t going to call home, either, no matter how much she suddenly wanted to talk to her mother—even though Mother had never understood her.

Nobody could know the terrible turn her life had taken. Nobody.

Lizzy wasn't going home to Texas in defeat. Maybe her perfect life was unraveling, but she wasn't going home. She'd get her job back and she'd get Bryce back, too. It was all a mistake. A terrible mistake. All she needed was a plan. Affirmations. She'd do some affirmations.

Downstairs the big doors banged, and she heard the familiar tread of boots on the stairs.

Walker! She'd forgotten about him.

The video!

Her brother was loping up the stairs two at a time as she shoved the tape underneath the cushions of her couch.

Wiping her eyes with the back of her hands, she pulled Vanilla into her lap and fought to look calm and composed.

By the time Walker entered the apartment and called to her, she and the baby were playing an innocent game of patty-cake.

"How's it going, Little Lizzy?"

"F-fine." She swallowed.

Their eyes met, and she knew he knew something was wrong.

Walker could read souls.

He waited for her to say something. When she didn't, he reached for the baby, who started clapping.

Then all he said to Lizzy was, "What's for supper?"

Three

Houston, Texas

Caesar

"Hi there." Cherry's lazy velvet voice caressed Caesar across twenty feet of darkness, but it was as if she reached out and circled his cock with her hand and lowered her head. His groin got as hot as if her talented tongue was already wetting him there.

Not that he was in the mood for sex or her lies. Hell, he'd just flown in from a board meeting in San Antonio. His temples ached with tension. He'd gone to the meeting hoping to iron out the details of the Golden Spurs Ranch Museum opening and the following celebration.

Only Joanne had been there. She'd asked the board to tell him to break up with Cherry or step down. She'd listed various ranch crises and how little he'd done for the ranch lately and how much she'd done. And how much Cole Knight had done as well—damn his rotten soul!

"You have no right to air our dirty laundry to the board," he'd growled when she'd gone on and on about Knight.

"My children own stock in the ranch," she'd said.

"She has no right to be here," he'd yelled at the board, pointing toward Joanne.

Then Leo, the CEO stood up. "I invited her here."

"Who is she—who are you, *any* of you—to tell me what to do?"

"I said, 'Hey, there...'" Cherry's warm, silky voice floated to him again.

"Sorry." He rubbed his aching temples. "My mind's a million miles away."

Break up with her? In a week?

He was furious at the board, at Joanne, at himself, and at Cherry. And he had a hard-on.

So what else was new?

Lately he hadn't thought about Cherry much when he wasn't with her. Why was that? But when he was with her, she consumed him.

Lying naked beside her, he loved her female scent and the dark color of her nipples. He loved the way they lay together afterward, drinking Scotch from the same bottle. The only reason he'd agreed to marry her was that she'd said she wouldn't let him screw her anymore if he didn't. When she'd stuck to her guns, he'd figured he'd get out of the bargain somehow. Then he'd given her a great

big diamond and a credit card at her twentieth birthday party to appease her. Ever since he'd felt like his life was hurtling toward some fatal destiny that he was powerless to avoid.

He slammed the door of her Houston studio apartment and stomped toward her.

"Want me to give you some special candy, lover buver?" she whispered.

His groin tightened. Special candy was their secret code.

Caesar flushed as he pitched the wad of credit card bills onto the low table near the bed.

"Did you bring me a present?" she cooed.

He looked around, pained. Sequined costumes, thong panties and bras dripped from chairs. T-shirts and dirty jeans littered the stained, turquoise shag carpet. Lingered in the closed room was a stale smell that he associated with airless rooms and unwashed sheets after too much sex.

Joanne was a neat freak. He used to hate the way she hung up each garment as she took it off—even when he was on fire to have her—and the way she stripped the sheets off the bed seconds after he came.

Caesar's head ached. He'd taken more Tylenol than he should've today, but the tablets weren't cutting it. The pill bottle in his glove compartment was running on empty. He felt old today, way older than fifty. Everybody told him, at least those who dared, that he was looking bad, that Cherry was dragging him down.

He'd given Cherry lots of presents because her joy in receiving them had always been rapturous. For her, presents were an aphrodisiac.

When he spoke, all he could manage was a rough, semiharsh whisper that didn't sound much like himself. "You've been buying yourself quite a few presents lately. More than I can afford."

She laughed. "Oh, is that all that's eatin' you, big daddy? You're rich. I'm poor."

"Land rich. Cash poor."

"If it was the other way around, I'd give you the moon."

Would she? Would she even look at him twice?

"Relax, big daddy. Relax." She sounded young and spoiled and very self-confident.

He knew their affair was as ridiculous as everybody said it was. When he'd agreed to marry her, he'd made himself the laughingstock of the state. Joanne's lawyers were having a field day, and still, he couldn't stop seeing Cherry. He simply couldn't...not when he remembered how he'd felt before he'd met her.

Sheets rustled as she rolled lazily across her bed toward him. Her diamond ring flashed. "Why don't you come to bed? I've gotten real horny lying in this big ol' bed playing with myself."

The room smelled muskily of other men. Not that he'd been here lately. He wasn't so stupid he didn't realize that she didn't crave him a tenth as much as he craved her.

He leaned down and yanked at the chain of the lamp beside the bed. Golden light flooded the messy room and lit up the silver sequined cowgirl hat she'd hung on a nail on a far wall. She'd been wearing that hat the night he'd first laid eyes on her. The rest of her fetching costume had been matching pasties, a G-string and high-heeled, sequined boots.

He pointed to the bills. "We need to talk."

She stretched like a cat. She slept in the nude. Deliberately she pushed the sheets lower to expose her soft, round body. Then she smiled up at him, batting her long lashes.

Don't look at that bright red mouth. But he did. Next he thought about what those lips did to pleasure him and was instantly aroused. She saw, and her smile brightened with childish delight.

"Come to bed, love. Let little mama scratch your itch."

Then she shoved the bills onto the floor and said, "Let little mama prove she's worth every single penny—and way, way more."

He laughed. Within minutes her expert hands had stripped him of his jeans and boots. Soon she lay on top of him, her mouth licking, circling, wetting his tanned flesh everywhere. She started kissing somewhere beneath his ears and worked down across his chest and stomach and then his belly,

her tongue dipping into his navel and then moving lower, trailing up and down between his legs... back and forth, and around and around until he burned like a wildfire. When he was breathing hard, she lowered her head, her long silver-blond hair tickling his stomach as she began to nip and nibble at the most erotic places.

Her damn mouth was like a vacuum. He was rock hard. His blood thrummed. His heart pounded. He felt wonderful, too wonderful for words, until the nagging pain began in his right temple.

Then it struck as viciously as a hammer blow. He felt an explosion in his head like his brain had come out of his skull, and then the pain stopped, and he felt different... numb... not in touch with himself... as if he were floating above them. He'd had the same out-of-body sensation when he'd been bucked off a bronc once and suffered a spinal injury. Only those symptoms had cleared after a day or two.

Like before, he couldn't feel his hands or his legs. Only this time he couldn't move anything, not even his lips or his tongue. It was as if his entire body were dead.

With total clarity he wondered what would happen when she figured out he wasn't all right. Who would she call first—the police, or an ambulance? Would this make the papers and cause still more scandal?

Cherry kept licking him, unaware of the change in him for a while, but he couldn't feel her tongue anymore. And he didn't care. He didn't care about anything. Not the ranch. Not Mia. Not Electra.

Her platinum head bobbed back and forth over his hard dark body for what seemed an eternity. Finally she stopped and looked up at his face, and her eyes grew so startled, they blazed in her white face.

With her fists, she pounded his chest. "Move! Say something! Do something!"

But he was made of petrified stone.

"What's wrong?" He knew she was shouting, but her voice was dim. "What's wrong with you?"

She slapped him hard across the face.

He didn't feel her hand, either, or her nails when they dug into his cheeks a little.

She slapped him again. "Say something!"

All he could do was stare at her as she slapped him again and again.

When she began to cry, he thought about Lizzy.

Would this bring her home? Would she finally realize she had to come home? Would she ever forgive him for the disgrace and scandal he'd brought on her name? Or for Cole?

Vaguely he was aware of Cherry sliding off him and reaching for the telephone. To his surprise she didn't call an ambulance or a doctor or even the police.

When he heard the name of the person she called, a chill went through him.

"You got me in this!" she screamed. "You made me hit on him! What do I do?"

He had been set up. When Caesar remembered who'd suggested that first night at the strip joint, his next thought was for Lizzy.

First Electra. Now him.

If Lizzy did come home, would she be next?

Cherry hung up and dialed another number. "You wanna know who I'm calling, I bet." She flashed him a hateful smile. "Well, I'm calling your wife!"

"Hi there—Mrs. Kemble." Brash as she was, even Cherry hesitated for a moment. "It's me—Cherry. *Your* husband's fiancé."

Joanne must have had plenty to say on that score because it was a long time before Cherry could get another word in.

"Y—yes, well, I—I don't care about any of that. He's in my bed... not yours. And he's as still as a stump. Somethin's bad wrong with him. If you don't send somebody to get him out of here, and send him fast, I'll call an ambulance, and, and the newspapers. And if I do that—all hell will break loose."

Another long silence.

“No, he’s not dead, and I don’t want no corpse in my bed! Do you hear me? No! I didn’t do anything to him. We were making love.” Another long silence. “No. No drugs. A stroke maybe... I’m not a doctor. I don’t know. Just hurry!”

Lizzy—he had to warn her.

Why in the name of God had he told everybody he wanted her to succeed him? By doing so, he’d signed her death warrant.

He fought to say her name, but his lips felt like cold concrete.

Imprisoned in his own body, he could only stare helplessly at Cherry, who was watching him, too. Her pretty face beneath her straw-white mane was a mask of disgust. Her eyes were cold and soulless. His throat tightened.

She got up slowly. Lifting her sequined cowboy hat off its nail, she put it on. Then she twirled round and round for him just like she had the first night.

“What’s going on in that mind of yours, big daddy?” Spreading her long legs, she made a faux bow.

She pitched her hat toward the bed and went to her mirror where she made up her mouth with vivid red lipstick and combed and fluffed her hair.

When she turned around again and smiled at him, she looked more ravishing than ever.

But it didn’t matter. He felt nothing, absolutely nothing for her.

Only Lizzy mattered.

And Electra. She would always matter.

He remembered the day he’d stood in the rain and scattered her ashes under the Spur Tree because she’d written in her will that that was her final wish. She’d chosen to be with him in death at least.

Joanne had been furious when he’d had a bronze marker placed beneath the tree with Electra’s name on it.

“Jack’s spurs are there, aren’t they?” he’d said to shut Joanne up.

Electra. Always Electra.

He had to stay alive to save their daughter.

Four

Manhattan

Too much was happening to her.

The phone was ringing, but Lizzy ignored it. She was too busy watching the two naked men writhe on her television screen with a total absorption that would have embarrassed her had she been of sound mind, which after the catastrophic events of today—she was not.

The late-afternoon sunlight was still red and sparkling outside her window, and the air was crisp and cool. It was a gorgeous evening for a walk. The smart Lizzy had known she should have gone with Walker and Vanilla when Walker had been nice enough to invite her, but the self-destructive Lizzy had been depressed at the thought of an activity that might cheer her up. That Lizzy had wanted, no, *needed*, to indulge in her very own pity party.

How could such a gorgeous day have been so terrible?

Finally the phone was silent.

For the first time in her life Lizzy wished she’d listened to her friend Mandy and had gotten into astrology or something useful. Maybe then she would have seen some cosmic warning in her horoscope or palm today.

Your life as you know it, as you dream it, is over now.

Her life was a joke. First Bryce. Then Nell. And now Walker.

It’s your own fault that you know about Walker.

Curiosity had led her to darker places before this, surely it had, although she couldn't think of any.

Finding out about Walker's private tape collection was the last thing she needed tonight. So why had she played the video the second Walker had left with Vanilla?

Because I'm a glutton for punishment. Because like every other female on earth, I'm like Pandora. If you tell me something is forbidden, I just have to open the box.

She remembered her father being hell-bent on making a man of Walker, as he'd put it. He'd made Walker hunt and ride and participate in rodeos. Daddy had bragged and bragged about how Walker had tamed the wildest broncs or killed the most game while both Hawk and Walker had flushed and looked uncomfortable. She thought about how Hawk had always been so protective of Walker.

The phone started ringing again, and Lizzy felt heavy demands from home. She felt guilty about not answering and torn because she actually wanted to talk to her mother. But if she talked to her right now, she'd tell her everything. Maybe she'd even mention Walker.

Mother—get a life.

Tough talk for a self-destructive wimp.

How many times had Mother called already? Seven? It seemed to Lizzy the phone had been ringing forever as she stared at her television screen where two men, obviously lovers, embraced. Then almost immediately the men lay down together on the bed again, and their bodies began to writhe.

The phone stopped ringing for at least a whole minute. Not that the lovers stopped what they were doing on that bed.

Just because he has a gay video doesn't mean he's gay. Maybe he was just curious and bought it as a joke. Maybe some gay guy with a crush on him had slipped it into his luggage... Maybe...

The phone started again. Mother had to be the most persistent human being in the world. Lizzy knew it was her mother because she'd checked her caller ID twice before when the phone had rung right after Walker had taken Vanilla down for a walk in the park and to buy take-out Chinese. She'd been hoping, of course, that it was Bryce or Nell calling to say they hadn't meant any of it.

As the phone continued to ring, Lizzy wiped at her damp eyes. One of the men was tall and blond, like Bryce; the other short and dark and very muscular like her cousin, Sam. The darker man had seven little daggers tattooed onto his forearm. Lizzy knew exactly how many daggers—because she'd counted them twice, maybe to keep her gaze there instead of drifting to the lower part of the men's bodies, which the camera was now focusing upon.

She averted her gaze, but out of the corner of her eye, she was aware of the men's supple, perfect bodies tensing, coming closer to some fatal edge. She saw all the parts of their magnificent bodies, yes, *all the parts*, those long rigid parts with the thick purple veins, and suddenly she started thinking about how long it had been since she and Bryce had had sex.

Men liked watching women with each other. Why? Should she be turned on by watching two men? Was something wrong with her because she resented this video? She thought about Bryce... about his leaving her... about her being too dull... especially in bed.

It was all her fault. What would a kick-ass fantasy heroine do?

What if... what if she proved to him she wasn't as dull as he thought she was? What if she made him see her as a completely different kind of woman... the way she was seeing Walker in a whole new light?

The men in the video were shouting at each other, soundlessly, because Lizzy had muted the volume.

Look away. Don't watch anymore. Don't torture yourself.

She felt far too insane to take sane advice, even from herself. It made her feel crazy to associate her sweet, wonderful brother with what she was watching. Walker had been so dear and thoughtful before he'd left with Vanilla. He'd sensed something was wrong, but unlike Mother, he hadn't pushed

her. He'd simply offered to take the baby out and buy dinner for them. He'd given her space, a precious commodity in Manhattan if ever there was one. Especially, for a Texan used to wide-open spaces.

"You're sure Bryce won't come home starved—"

She mumbled something to Walker about Bryce working late.

"So, if Bryce isn't coming home, are you sure you don't want to come with us?" His eyes had been so kind. As if he knew. "It's a beautiful night."

"Just go. I'm really tired."

He'd lingered at the door, tall and cowboy dark in a plaid shirt and jeans, until she'd said, "go," again.

Walker was all male, tougher than any cowhand she knew. He was! Hadn't her daddy told everybody that over and over again? Walker wasn't... He couldn't be... gay. Not her brother.

But despite her fierce determination to cling to what she wanted to believe about him, her life with him was flashing before her eyes like images on cards. Only now every image had a new meaning as she viewed it with fresh insight.

Walker was as formidably large and male as his brother Hawk and as tough as any man. He could stay on a bucking bronc longer than any of them—but he was so kind and gentle and thoughtful. He never bulldozed over people the way Daddy or Hawk or even Cole sometimes did. He loved art and the theater.

Walker couldn't be gay. Women threw themselves at him.

They asked him out on dates.

But he never asked them.

The big glass doors downstairs opened and crashed closed. Even before she heard Walker's heavy boots on the carpeted stairs, she jumped up, took the tape out of the player, rushed to the second bedroom and hid it in a drawer.

As her brother strode up the stairs, she ran into her own bedroom and took the phone off the hook, so it couldn't ring again. If he knew Mother was calling, he'd call her.

By the time Walker walked inside carrying Vanilla, Lizzy was back on the couch with her hands folded primly in her lap.

Vanilla clapped when she saw Lizzy.

Lizzy wished she'd had time to turn the lamp on. She wished she'd grabbed a book or something. It probably looked odd, her just sitting there in the dark.

She steeled herself to look at Walker and felt instantly guiltily disturbed when she did. Instead of his kind, handsome, dark face, she saw those seven tattoos and the joined forbidden parts of those two male bodies.

She took a deep breath.

"You seem in an odd mood," he said.

"I—I'm fine. H-how come you and Daddy... How come you left Texas?"

"Well, I never was Daddy's favorite. Maybe I got tired of always having to prove myself."

"What did you and Daddy fall out over?"

"We had a different vision for the museum."

"That artist painting the murals was a friend of yours in college, wasn't he? You brought him home to the ranch once? Were his paintings too abstract or something?"

"Something like that," Walker agreed vaguely.

Their father had very strong opinions about modern art. If a painting wasn't like a photograph, he thought it was hogwash.

"You hungry?" Walker asked, changing the subject abruptly, but still in that gentle, comforting tone, as he carried Vanilla to her.

"Starved," she managed to say as she took Vanilla, who clapped and smiled some more.

Walker made Vanilla a bottle while Lizzy settled Vanilla in her high chair with a cardboard book. She got plates and silverware out, then brother and sister sat down together at the scarred table she and Amanda had bought at a fair in the Village. Vanilla placed the book aside and guzzled her bottle noisily.

Walker spooned steaming rice and vegetables onto their plates. With her chopsticks, Lizzy toyed with her food. Everything was exactly the same between them as it had been before she'd watched the video, and yet nothing was the same.

"I never did find the knack of eating with those silly sticks, either," Walker said.

Lizzy dropped them with a clatter and picked up her fork. Then she took a deep breath to ward off the panic that threatened to overwhelm her.

He watched her when she set her fork down a few minutes later.

Vanilla pounded her high-chair tray with her bottle, and Lizzy forced a smile.

"You want me to go out and get something else?" Walker said.

"No... No. The food is great...really. I guess I'm not as hungry as I thought I was."

Her stomach churned. No way could she swallow a bite.

"Well, I reckon I'll be leaving in the morning," he said. "Early—before you get up."

"Are you going home?"

"No. I'll call from time to time to see how you're doing. I'll give you my new address when I have one."

It occurred to her he was going through some crisis as bad or maybe even worse than hers. But her own pain and inhibitions wouldn't let her reach out to him.

Maybe that was for the best. She hoped so. Maybe it was better for them both if he kept his secrets and she kept hers. That way, their lives looked perfect...on the surface.

"I'm glad you came," she said, studying him until he looked up and did the same.

He nodded.

She lifted her fork again and then set it down. "Come back anytime."

"New York's a great city. Tell Bryce..."

She bit her lips. Then her hand knocked the fork off the table.

"Hey," he said. "It's okay."

"I know. Everything's fine. Just fine. Perfect."

"Sure."

"He's just working late."

"Sure. You oughtta take him home to meet the folks some time."

She drew a deep, shaky breath and looked away. "I—I will. First thing."

They spoke in generalities until Vanilla started banging her empty bottle on the high chair again and then threw it down on the floor.

Lizzy used that as her excuse to get up. Scooping Vanilla out of the high chair, she gathered her plate and glass and began to wash the dishes. Later, after Vanilla was asleep in her crib, Walker and she finished decorating the table by the door for Halloween. Not that they said much until she came out of the bathroom in her bathrobe and was on her way back to her bedroom to go to bed.

"Your turn to shower," she said a little too brightly before she headed to bed.

He got up off the couch and went to her and pulled her close. "I guess I'd better say goodbye now."

"I'm glad you came."

"I love you, Lizzy. I wish you the best. You take care of yourself. And thank Bryce when he comes home."

She wrapped her arms around Walker and held his solid, muscular body tightly. "You're the most wonderful little brother a girl ever had."

“Little?” He smiled down at her, and when she met his gaze, for an instant she felt incredible pain in his dark eyes.

“I love you,” she said simply, not knowing what else to say.

“I know,” he said, letting her go, but he looked trapped.

“Wherever you go, don’t you do anything wild and crazy.”

“The same goes for you.”

Houston, Texas

Joanne

It’s my fault, Joanne thought coolly as she let out the water and got out of the tub. She reached for a thick towel and wrapped herself in it.

Why had she gone to the board with her demands? Why hadn’t she simply told Caesar privately she couldn’t face the museum opening with him parading around Texas with Cherry on his arm?

He’d seemed to shrink when the board had taken her side. His skin had gone papery dry and bloodless. She’d gone after the one thing besides Lizzy that mattered to him—his control of the ranch. When she’d said Cole Knight did more than Caesar did to run the ranch, she’d probably made him so furious he’d had a stroke.

Was she crazy? After all he’d done, to even question her own actions? All his life Caesar had done exactly what he wanted, taken what he wanted. Not that he’d seen in that way. He thought he’d martyred himself for the good of the ranch.

Leaving the bathroom, she headed into the bedroom where her nightgown lay spread in a splash of vivid yellow silk across her huge bed. Even after a long hot bath, Joanne felt alienated and all alone in the luxurious, nondescript hotel room Cole had checked her into. She hadn’t spent many nights on her own in such a room where the decor was perfect, if sterile and the same as all other hotel rooms on the floor. He’d offered to call her friends to let them know she was in the city, but she’d said no. Now she felt so alone and afraid she almost wished she was staying with friends.

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