



RYAN RANCH TRILOGY #1

**COWBOY**  
*Lies*

**LYNDE LAKES**

# *Cowboy Lies*

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## *Dedication*

To my son, Capt. Bob, who will always  
remember the horse that kicked him in the head.

## *Acknowledgements*

Rainbows to my wonderful editors,  
Yvette Lynn, Debbie Herald, and Sara Rice,  
and to my artist Anastasia Rabiya.

## Chapter One

Nothing felt right—nothing felt familiar—nothing jogged memories. Even her own name sounded strange to her ears, if it was her name. Molly Ryan? That mellow name didn't fit the fire blazing in her gut, and that scared the hell out of her. Married. Was she really married?

She'd begged to stay at the hospital. She'd felt safe there and had grown to trust Dr. De La Fuente during her months of treatment. That is, until he released her to this stranger in tight blue jeans and told her to trust the guy. How could she trust a Stetson-wearing hunk of testosterone like him? God, he was pacing next to the fireplace like a fenced-in wild stallion. The initial shock of learning that she might be shackled to this hard-edged cowboy slid closer to full-fledged panic. Did he expect her to share his bedroom tonight?

Lamplight reflected and magnified the shadow on the wall of his feral, agitated movements. Did he resent that she'd been thrust on him in this bewildered condition? Would he turn that barely contained anger on her? She shivered, fighting an urge to bolt. "I can't be married to you. Nothing seems right!"

He paused, and his piercing gaze locked with hers—the intensity sent chills along her nerve endings. "You're gonna have to trust me on this one, Molly," he drawled. "We're hitched."

There was that trust word again. Before she could respond, he wheeled around and headed out of the room. This was unreal. The possibility that she'd ever loved this man, let alone had married him, was as remote as finding the proverbial needle in a haystack.

Fighting the instinctual warning twisting her insides, and using the strength of that growing fear, she chased him down the hallway, running to keep up. "Not so fast, cowboy. What did you say your name was again?"

He'd told her a number of times—she'd repeated the name Matt Ryan over and over in her mind, trying in vain to trigger anything that would indicate a past with him—but she wanted to keep him talking while she attempted to put things together in small circles, feeling her way.

He paused and gave her a hard look. "Okay, one more time," he said in a low, tight voice. "I'm Matthew Ryan, Matt for short. Is that so danged hard to remember?"

It wasn't, so why didn't his name trigger a memory? With searching fingers, she touched the tender spot where the needle had gone in. The drugs the doctor had shot into her veins to keep her calm during her long helicopter ride from the private hospital somewhere along the Mexico border to this South Texas ranch had pretty much worn off, and her head was getting clearer by the minute. The doctor had diagnosed her memory loss as traumatic amnesia, fugue state, whatever that was.

Matt turned his back on her again and continued down the hall. His tall, lean body was custom built to wear those faded, hip-hugging blue jeans. When he reached a closed door down the hall, he opened it and entered.

Before crossing the threshold, she peeked in. *Please don't let this be his bedroom.* She sighed in relief at the sight of pastel walls, a rocking chair, baby articles, and a crib. An image of an empty crib flashed in her mind. She stiffened until she saw the baby inside, kicking its feet in delight. She had an urge to gather the baby into her arms and run, but to where? Why?

Her gaze flew to Matt. His shoulders and chest filled his royal blue chambray shirt in a way that made him look altogether too formidable. She shivered. Maybe she had known him before. If so, what had he done to her in the past that just looking at him gave her the urge to pound his impressive chest?

What did the flash of memory about an empty crib mean? Perhaps she could rein in her fear if she knew the basis of her anger and that fight-or-flight feeling.

The Stetson shading his eyes increased her sense of uneasiness. When he'd picked her up at the doctor's house, he'd worn the Stetson. She assumed he'd taken it off during the helicopter flight, but she couldn't swear to it. She spent the trip drifting in and out of consciousness while on a cot behind the cockpit. When they left the craft, he had it on again.

To squelch her growing anxiety, she took a deep breath. Maybe she wouldn't feel so small if she gathered her courage and cut him down to size. "Isn't it rude to wear a hat in the house in Texas?"

Matt looked her up and down, then took off his Stetson, and tossed it across the room. It hooked over one of the two protruding spiky knobs on the back of the wooden rocking chair in the corner of the nursery. He still looked dangerous. His black, wavy hair fell across his forehead in a bad-boy look, and thick strands curled in a rugged line across his collar. "Better?" he asked, raising a devilish eyebrow.

"Er. Yes. Thanks." She swallowed to clear her constricted throat. "There's something else you can help me with."

He shifted his weight. "Fire away. I'll help if I can."

"Well, I've got your name down pat now, but I need to hear the other stuff again."

He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling and shook his head. "All right, for the last time, I'm the owner of this cattle ranch. You're my wife, Molly, and this is our baby, Sara Jane." He gestured to the baby lying in the crib with her big blue eyes fixed on the tinkling zoo mobile revolving over her head.

Molly gripped the railing of the crib. "I can accept that this is my baby—"

"Our baby," he corrected in a deep voice that vibrated through her.

She took a breath to calm her thudding heart. "Okay, our baby. But this doesn't feel like my home. I don't feel safe. Why is that?"

Matt didn't quite look her in the eye. "The doctor gave you something. Maybe your paranoia is a side effect. It'll pass. You have nothing to fear here."

"Paranoia? That's not it. I have a good reason to feel the way I do."

Sara Jane cooed and waved her little fists. With that cap of curly red hair, the baby could be hers. Suddenly, a desire to hold Sara Jane overwhelmed her. *Would it feel right?* She lifted the baby into her arms and drew her close, inhaling baby powder and the sweet smell of baby oil. She loved her, no doubt about that, but she felt sure she'd love any baby. "How old is she?"

"Three months." Matt took the baby's small hand in his large callused one. His gesture brought him too close for comfort, and Molly stepped back.

To avoid looking into his eyes, she lowered her gaze and stared down at her flat belly. "Shouldn't I be more rounded if I had a baby so recently?"

Matt threw his hands up in the air. "For crying out loud! You just got out of the hospital. You've been ill. Remember?"

"That's just it. I don't remember, and you know it."

His eyes softened. "Be patient. It'll all come back."

"Will it?" What if this wasn't her life at all? "My name doesn't even fit me."

Matt laughed without humor. "Yeah, well, I'll have to agree with that. With that auburn hair and spitfire tongue, you should've been named Blaze or Flame."

Molly glared at him. Could she really be married to this cowboy Neanderthal? She jostled the baby, reveling in her warmth against her breast. This *did* feel right.

Matt reached for Sara Jane. "Time to put this little angel back down. She's not usually up this late." Molly backed up a step, but Matt didn't let that stop him. He took the baby from her arms, retrieved a fresh bottle from a small ice chest near the crib, and placed it in the warmer on top of the dresser, while holding Sara Jane with easy confidence in the crook of his arm.

She watched Matt while the milk heated, wondering how he fit into the frightening image of the empty crib. Instinct told her she should keep the flash of memory to herself until she had more to go on. "I can give Sara Jane her bottle."

He tested the milk to be sure it wasn't too hot, sat down in the rocker, and stuck the nipple in the baby's mouth. "You can take over tomorrow—after you rest."

Molly bristled but held in her frustration. A dark-haired beauty had been here when they'd arrived about an hour ago. Matt hadn't introduced her, and she had disappeared without a word. "Who was that woman?"

“What woman?”

“Don’t play games. The dark-haired beauty.”

“Oh, her.” He looked down, masking his emotions. “My housekeeper, Tita.”

Molly leaned against the wall and folded her arms. “Is she the one who’s been taking care of Sara Jane in my absence?”

“Partly. But when I’m home, I do it. Sometimes, the rest of the family helps out.”

“Rest of the family? Where are they? When do I meet them?”

“Soon.” Matt glanced at his watch. His neck reddened as if mentioning his folks had embarrassed him. *Why?* “You’ve been up too many hours for your first night home. Go to bed. Your *temporary* room adjoins this one.

Relief washed over Molly. At least he didn’t expect them to sleep together tonight. But what did temporary mean? How temporary?

He pointed down the hall. “Just turn to the right. Everything you need is in there.”

“I’m really not that tired.” She was exhausted, but how could she rest with so many questions swirling in her mind? “Tell me more about your family.

Matt gave her a stern look and gestured with his head. “Go. Doctor’s orders.”

Damn Matt. He was rude and as bossy as any Third World dictator, and not the kind of man to give a woman that warm, secure feeling she craved. She was about to tell him so when something about the loving way he was holding Sara Jane touched her heart, and she decided to let him get away with his tyranny one more time. Tomorrow, she’d get her answers, one way or another.

\* \* \* \*

Molly awoke with a start in a king-size bed—a strange bed. Then the events of the previous night came rushing back. She threw her legs over the side of the bed and thrust herself to her feet. It was time for her showdown with Matt.

She showered fast and dressed in one of the outfits she found in the closet. The Levi’s felt stiff and a little tight, but the boots were comfortable enough. She touched the fringe on the vest. If these were her clothes, why did she feel like a city woman playing cowgirl?

Matt could answer that—and he would if she had anything to say about it. But first, she had to see to Sara Jane’s needs. She opened the door of her bedroom and looked into the hall. The nursery door stood wide open, and she tiptoed inside.

The crib was empty!

An unexplainable, overwhelming panic gripped Molly. She could scarcely breathe. It was as though the empty crib had triggered buried emotions of a past too horrible to remember—something concerning a baby—she had to find Sara Jane now!

Following the aroma of coffee, she ran to the kitchen. Sara Jane was strapped into a high chair, gurgling and happy. Molly let out a sigh of relief and kissed the baby's dimpled cheek. Then she saw the housekeeper, Tita, by the sink. "I got scared when I found the empty crib." Tita shrugged. Molly forced a smile while trying to hide her disappointment that it wasn't Matt caring for Sara Jane. *Darn. Here I am, all geared up to have it out with him.* "Where is Matt?"

Tita shook her head as though she didn't understand. When speaking English didn't work, Molly tried Spanish. How did she know Spanish? Maybe she'd learned it while in the care of Dr. De La Fuente. Or maybe she came from a Spanish heritage. It pleased her to learn that she spoke it with such ease, but it raised more questions. Molly blinked in surprise when Tita didn't seem to understand her. All she got in response was a sad look and another shake of the head.

Why wouldn't Tita acknowledge her? Was she mute? Molly used an instinctive, untrained sign language of sorts to ask if Sara Jane had been fed. Tita handed Molly two jars of baby food—soft, watery oatmeal and applesauce.

Before the housekeeper left the room, she thrust a note from Matt into Molly's hand. It had only three words on it, in big bold black letters—DON'T GO OUTSIDE.

"Hmm. Guess what, Sara Jane? After Mommy feeds you, we're going outside."

\* \* \* \*

Molly found a stroller in the foyer and placed it at the bottom of the front steps.

She settled Sara Jane into it, propped with small pillows and a safety belt. The baby gave a delightful dimpled smile that sent a surge of warmth to Molly's breasts. Wait a minute—if this baby was hers, why wasn't she nursing her? It must have had something to do with her hospitalization. Matt said she'd been ill, but she felt strong, healthy.

She smiled at Sara Jane. "Mommy's just fine, isn't she?" Mommy. Had she accepted it? She wanted to. No one could be with Sara Jane for over two minutes without falling in love with her. Feeding Sara Jane had been fun and felt natural enough, yet not really familiar.

The morning sun was warm and bright, lighting the surrounding barns and sheds with the glowing freshness of wet paint. Although the distant roar of ranch machinery and trucks gave the feeling of activity in the air, Molly saw no one.

Even though Sara Jane wore little denim coveralls and a red, long-sleeved cotton shirt that protected her from the sun, Molly shaded her with the stroller's awning. She wouldn't take a chance with the baby's delicate skin. She pushed the stroller along the bumpy, dusty ground



toward the nearest barn, in hope of finding Matt, some of his family, or at least a talkative ranch hand.

She felt someone's gaze boring into her back—felt someone following her. Her heart skipped a beat. She looked around. A toothpick shadow jumped out of sight. If it was a ranch hand, why was he playing games? The hair on her neck prickled. Was there danger here besides Matt? Or was the unnerving sensation a reaction to something in her past? Don't go outside, Matt's note had said in bold letters. Molly thrust her chin into the air, refusing to be intimidated. This was supposed to be her home, so why should she be afraid? Maybe her fear stemmed from the realization that nothing looked familiar. She glanced around at the house, the barn, the equipment. It was as if she had been blindfolded; led to a strange, mysterious place; and then released to stagger around on her own, disoriented.

Two dogs, a black mongrel and an Australian Shepherd with tan and white markings, jumped out of the shadows and barked at her. Startled, she jerked the stroller to the right, and then hurried along. They followed and seemed to be herding her. No dog names came to mind. She talked generic doggy-talk to them, and they wagged their tails. Well, at least they were friendly enough. Did they know the sound of her voice?

On her way to the barn, she passed three pickup trucks—two primer gray with rusty bumpers and the newer, red one with a shiny chrome grill that Matt had used last night to drive them to the ranch from his nearby private airport where he tied down his Cessna and helicopter. Her husband—if in fact he was her husband—was obviously wealthy.

Praying for keys, she peered inside each truck. No such luck. Where would she go, anyway? Did she even know how to drive? Yes. Somehow she felt confident that she did.

In the distance, she saw men working on the split corral fences. Beyond the men, a big truck shrank smaller and smaller, heading out. Matt had said this was a cattle ranch so the rig was either taking cattle to market or going out empty to bring livestock back.

Molly picked up her stride, all the while talking to Sara Jane and pointing out the antics of the dogs romping beside them. When they reached the barn she saw that most of the horse stalls were empty. Daylight streamed through the high eave-line windows. A horse snorted, and the sound echoed through the cavernous wood structure. Somewhere at the other end of the barn, a radio was tuned to a Mexican station playing a fast polkalike Texas-Mexican piece called the *conjunto*. How did she know the music? Maybe she did have a Mexican background.

She heard men's voices speaking Spanish, and located two *vaqueros* cleaning out stalls. The tall, rawboned man made her think of Don Quixote, and the short squat man Sancho Panza. The theme from *Man of La Mancha* hummed in her head. Why did she know those things? Maybe her memory was coming back. Or maybe she'd only forgotten things in her past too painful to remember. That's what the doctor believed.

She focused on the *vaqueros* again. Both dark-skinned men appeared to be in their late fifties. She approached, smiling. "Have you seen Matt or any of the Ryan family?"

They gave a shake of the head. “No speak English.”

She tried Spanish. It was the same as with Tita—more shaking of the head. Damn it, she’d heard them speaking Spanish. Matt had to be behind everyone’s silence. But why? Molly kicked a bale of hay in frustration and left the barn.

“Well, Sara Jane, what now?” Molly plunked herself down on a boulder, and shading her eyes from the sun with her hand, she looked off into the distance. “Do you think we’d have better luck with those men working on the fences?” If she walked out there, the bumps and ruts would shake Sara Jane’s brains out, and then she’d be given the same silent treatment anyway. Eying the nearby pickup trucks again, she wondered how to get her hands on a set of keys and how far it was to the nearest town.

For miles, there was only gently rolling land, replete with scrub oak, mesquite and cactus, and, in the far distance, the purple haze of the rocky mountains. The barrenness had its own kind of beauty, but the cloudless light blue sky reinforced Molly’s sense of isolation.

From what Matt had said on the drive from his landing strip, he raised a breed of cattle called the Santa Gertrudis—the best breed for this arid climate because it was unaffected by heat and insects. He had all kinds of livestock, he’d said, including bulls and quarter horses. And he used to compete in rodeo competitions. Why didn’t she remember any of that? It was as though she’d never been here before.

She bent over the stroller and lifted Sara Jane onto her lap. The baby kicked her feet and gurgled, a big smile on her face. Love for this little angel had been instantaneous, but if this was her child, why didn’t she remember her?

At the thunder of horse hooves, Molly looked up. In the distance, swirls of dust spiraled up from the desert floor as a lone rider galloped her way. She watched the fluid beauty of motion and admired the way rider and horse moved almost as one. He was coming straight toward the barn.

It was Matt. Subtle danger emanated from him. He dug his knees into the red quarter horse’s flanks, yanked hard on the reins to bring the horse to a stop near the split rail corral, and dismounted fast, the buckles on his vest jangling. He spat out a succinct oath, flipped the reins around a rung of the fence a couple of times, and stomped over to her. Levi’s hugged his thighs like a glove. Molly forced herself to look up at his face.

His jaw flexed, and his earth-brown eyes flashed. “I told you to stay in the house.”

His low, hoarse drawl hummed through Molly like an electrical current. She jumped to her feet and shifted Sara Jane in her arms. “Look, I don’t take orders.” She kept her volume as close to a normal speaking voice as possible for Sara Jane’s sake. “Why do you want me to stay in the house anyway? Other than your phony non-English-speaking hired hands, there doesn’t seem to be anyone around for miles.” She wondered if she should mention the other exception—the pencil thin shadow. *But what if he’d assigned the man to watch me . . .* “Am I a captive here or what?”

Matt pushed his black Stetson high on his forehead. His eyes softened some. “No, ma’am. But you aren’t used to it out here. There’s rattlers and—”

“Not used to it? This is supposed to be my home!” Close to tears, Molly jostled the cooing baby against her breast. “I’m your wife, and yet you call me ma’am!” Her mind was like a nearly blank tablet, and Matt was scribbling gibberish on it.

Matt shifted his weight on dusty black leather boots. His lanky, hungry stance made her want to run. But those long, powerful legs suggested that perhaps he could outrun her.

“Didn’t want to scare you off like a skittish filly by getting too familiar. The doc said it’d take a spell for you to get used to the idea of being my wife.”

Wife. The word pounded at her. Her throat felt raw. “What makes you think I’ll ever get used to it?” Her voice cracked like a dry twig.

His lips twitched. “You did before.” Predatory magnetism radiated from the hard planes of his face and the lean lines of his body charging the air around him.

She was in big trouble. “Well, maybe I’m a different person now.” Her annoyance jelled into a cold lump in her stomach. Why did she get so angry every time she looked at him?

Images flashed in Molly’s mind—the adobe hospital with the giant cactus at the entrance; the dark, hawk-nosed Dr. De La Fuente with unsmiling black eyes; daily shots in the arm; going in and out of consciousness. Molly’s heartbeat pulsed in her ears. Dr. De La Fuente had said that the amnesia was temporary, that her past would come back in scant images, unfolding moment by moment. She glared at Matt. He was so overwhelmingly male. His intensity burned her like a brand. Maybe it was her marriage to this bossy, domineering cowboy that she wanted to forget—if indeed she was married to him at all.

He’d told her his ranch was in South Texas, but that covered a lot of land. “Exactly where are we?”

Silence. He watched her with an intensity that made her squirm. Molly tapped her booted foot, wanting to shake him. The wind blew her hair about her face and lashed her body with nerve-jangling electricity. The silence tore at her until she wanted to scream. She pressed her lips tight. The hay was in his loft, so to speak.

Finally, he said, “I told you. My ranch.”

She met his glaring look head on. “Not our ranch?”

“Of course. Our ranch.” He shifted his weight again, and she noticed the holstered six-gun at his side for the first time. The distant screech of a hawk sent a tremor through her—or was it the predatory demeanor of this gun-toting cowboy?

“Give me a break,” she said. “I need some specifics here. What is the nearest town? And how far away is it?”

It surprised her when his lips broke into a slow grin, and he stepped forward. “Why, darlin’,” he said, lowering his voice so that the endearment he’d used for the first time flowed through her like heated honey, “we’re in the grand ol’ Lone Star State of Texas. South Texas, that is. South of San Antonio. Didn’t I tell you that already?”

Molly refused to step away, even though Matt was so close she could feel his breath on her cheeks. His face was a blur of taunting lips and teasing eyes. He made no move to touch her, but his smoldering stare caressed her like enveloping flames. A swift, hot flush rose in her cheeks. She didn’t know this man, maybe she’d never known him, and she sure as hell didn’t trust him.

Unable to stand his closeness a second longer, she stepped back from his heat, his maleness, and hated that she was the one to retreat first. “Why are the phones in the house disconnected? Why won’t anyone talk to me?”

\* \* \* \*

The cord in the back of Matt’s neck tightened, and he clenched his hands and wished she’d just accept things. “Doctor’s orders,” he said, bristling his frustration. “Dr. De La Fuente said the quieter the place, the sooner you’ll remember.” For good measure, Matt gave a choked sound and cleared his throat. “And then I’ll get my wife back.”

He watched Katrina Molette Radlavich—or Kat as he used to call her—to see if she was buying any of it. She’d gone through several names in the past year, Margaret Jones, Sally Smith, and others. He’d switched to calling her Molly after the amnesia hit. He could have cut the silence with a machete. She raked her fingers through her fiery tangles of thick auburn hair, sending the tips dancing across her shoulders like flames. Her eyes, flashing and green as Verde Creek, measured him with distrust. A distrust that he’d earned, much to his regret. *Sorry, li’l darlin’,* he thought. *To keep you and the baby alive, I had no choice.*

Using Sara Jane to gain Molly’s trust was a dirty trick, but the baby was her weak point and the heart of her vulnerability. He reached out his arms to Sara Jane. “Come to Daddy,” he said. It was easy to play daddy to this beautiful little filly. Everyone who saw her loved her.

He took the child from Molly’s arms, and Molly’s fringed vest got tangled up in the process. *Lordy, lordy,* he thought, brushing against the high-tipped breasts he knew so well. He felt an absurd and dangerous triumph when the buds sprang up.

In spite of Molly’s apparent arousal, her expression came alive with indignation. “Watch your hands, cowboy.”

He grinned. It was ridiculous to apologize for brushing against her after all they’d been to each other. But what the hell. “Sorry, little darlin’, but we do have a license to touch each other.”

The document looked pretty damned authentic, too, he thought, then was disgusted at his smugness.

“I want to see it.”

Damn, she would. But he didn't want to talk about documents. His loins burned. With vivid memories lurking at the edge of his mind ready to spark at the slightest provocation, how would he get through this charade? His pulse throbbed in his temple. Was it just thirteen months ago that she'd writhed in his arms, all willing, moist, and perfumed? Her mouth had been soft, responsive, and fiery against his. His knee had parted her thighs. She'd opened to him, and he had sunk into the silky passage to her womanliness—a pulsating, hot poker against moist, blazing satin. *Lord, give me strength.* But there was no stopping his Levi's from tightening against the zipper.

\* \* \* \*

Smells of strong coffee and spicy food wafted around the ranch house kitchen, which reminded Matt it had been too many hours since breakfast. He'd skipped lunch, and it was a bit early for supper, but eating now would give him a chance to visit with Molly. Tita had left their meal in the oven before she left for the day—the good ol' bowl o' red. He smiled. Few meals were better than chili con carne and Mexican corn bread.

Tita lived in her own little place on the ranch with her husband Alfonso and son Roberto, the stable boy. Alfonso was the head vaquero on the ranch and a trusted amigo.

Matt handed Sara Jane to Molly and served up the food. Molly jiggled the baby until the infant's eyes drooped closed. Molly carried her to the nursery, and then rejoined Matt at the table. “I still want to see our marriage license.”

He went to a drawer, pulled out the bogus document, and slid it in front of her.

She frowned at it. “Is this real?”

“Your distrust is getting tiresome, Molly.” They ate in silence, Molly picking at the food. When Matt finally had had about all the silence he could stand, he drawled, “If you'd just relax, you'll get used to things around here. It's not a bad place.”

She snorted. “Relax? That's laughable. Damn it, what happened to me?”

Driving a hand into his hair, he slicked it back from his forehead and sighed. Maybe if he told her some of it, it would ease her mind and she'd settle in and let him worry about the problems they faced. “I'd be mighty proud to tell you what I know, little darlin'. Dr. De La Fuente said your amnesia is an acute non-psychotic syndrome. Without evidence of bruises, fractures, or double vision, he didn't think you'd fallen. And your EEG was fine.”

“So what caused the amnesia?”

Matt knew the doctor had covered some of this with her, but it seemed she needed more assurances. “The doc thinks it was stress-induced, and you're in what he called a fugue state.

There's a limit to how much stress a person can take at a given time, and when things become too stressful, the mind escapes for self-preservation."

"My life stressed me out?" She tilted her chin and narrowed her eyes. "Like being married to you?"

He chuckled. "Very funny. Whatever caused the stress, it happened while you were away on a shopping trip in San Antonio. The next thing I knew, you were in the hospital in Mexico."

He hated lying, and the shopping trip stuff was a lie, but if she remembered too fast, it could cause a serious setback, deepen the trauma, and make his job more difficult.

"If my memory loss is temporary . . . then how temporary is it?"

"Anywhere from a few days to several months." Matt wasn't ready to tell her that to get well, eventually, she would have to deal with what caused the trauma.

"When did we meet?"

The question caught him off guard, but he didn't mind telling her that. The date was etched into his mind forever. "December first, two years ago."

"How and where?"

He'd already said too much. "Best to let it all come back naturally. Now, about the routine here, what I expect—"

"Hold it, cowboy. I don't care what you expect. If I'm going to live here with you, I need to know something about our life together."

Kat—rather, Molly—was sassier than ever. Damn it, he'd have to give her more half-truths. "We met at a party. You were wearing a stunner of a green dress that matched your eyes. You accused me of drinking too much and demanded my keys. Said you'd drive me home."

Molly's steady look and glinting eyes were mocking. "And you let me? A big, strong, macho cowboy like you?"

Matt shrugged. "Why not? You're a looker. Besides, your take-charge ways amused me."

"Amused you?"

Her caustic tone sent up red flags, but he had to tell her about the kiss. "In front of my apartment, before I staggered out of your car, I stole a kiss. And you kissed me back. I mean you really kissed me back. I reckon I fell for you right on the spot." He grinned, enjoying the memory.

"Hmm," she said, sounding unimpressed. "Whose party?"

“A guy named Smitty, I think. But after guzzling all that beer, I couldn’t swear to it.”

Matt left out the specifics. He didn’t want to give her enough to follow up on—for instance, that the guy throwing the party had connections to Dallas’s biggest crime boss, or that Molly had been a crack reporter for the *Dallas Morning News* working on a key crime story, or that he was a federal agent and the case had brought them together . . . and then torn them apart.

For a year, she’d lived under armed guard while waiting to testify against crime boss Fernando Antonio Maltese Del Fuego. But because of the repeated attempts on her life, she’d disappeared into the Federal Witness Protection Program. She had had to give up everything—her identity, her family, her friends, her relationships, and her job as a reporter, which he knew she loved.

Matt had told her from the beginning that their romance couldn’t go anywhere because once she went into the program, he wouldn’t be going with her. The abrupt end of their affair had hurt worse than if he’d cut off his arm. They were together only once after that. They had run into each other quite by accident, and after sharing a bottle of wine, they’d done something stupid and woke up together full of regret. He hadn’t regretted making love to her—only that, for her safety, it could never happen again.

Too bad she’d found someone else—the man who had fathered Sara Jane. Matt hadn’t picked up the pieces of his own life so easily. There hadn’t been anyone for him since Molly.

Now, out of necessity, they had been thrown together again. He’d been ordered to replace the dead agents who’d been guarding her. The mob had splattered the guts of Agent Bob Clancy and Agent Tom Murphy all over the wall and had taken Sara Jane. They knew if they grabbed the baby, Molly would clam up in order to get her child back. Instead, Molly went off the deep end and blanked out her whole life.

Matt had arranged to get Molly admitted to a hospital across the border into Mexico, in the capable hands of his longtime friend, Dr. De La Fuente. Once Molly was safe, Matt rescued Sara Jane using the same bloody tactics against the mob that they had used on the dead agents. It was the first time he’d killed, and he hoped the last. He still felt nauseous when he thought too much about it. Even if he never got over it, Sara Jane’s life was worth his anguish. Now it was up to him to keep both Molly and Sara Jane out of harm’s way. Soon, he’d have to decide how much he could safely tell Molly about her forgotten past. He knew his lies up to now had made trust between them almost impossible. He wished he hadn’t gotten her talking, questioning.

She stroked her left ring finger. “Where’s my wedding band?”

Thank God, he’d thought of the ring earlier this morning. He had flown his chopper to Buck George’s ranch to buy one. Buck’s hobby was jewelry making, and he had a slew of rings around, including the size six Matt figured would fit Molly’s delicate finger. He reached in his pocket and pulled out the leather pouch with the ring inside. “Here ya go, little darlin’.”

He took her small, soft hand in his and slipped the ring on. He suddenly felt like he'd leaped off a two-hundred-foot cliff or had lost control of his plane. Was he so marriage-phobic that just slipping a ring on a woman's finger sent him into a tailspin?

"Someone on the hospital staff took the ring away while you were in recovery." Matt's throat constricted, and he had trouble getting the next lie out. "The doc gave it to me for safekeeping when I picked you up."

Molly held up her hand and studied the ornate design. "It's"—she paused—"different."

Did that mean she liked it, or not? It didn't matter. The ring didn't mean a damn thing. He tugged at his collar then forced a grin. "One of a kind. For a one-of-a-kind lady."

She nailed him with a searing look that could brand a heifer. "Is our marriage a good one?"

"It was until you forgot me, little darlin'."

"Quit calling me that. I prefer Molly. That is if it's my real name."

"Whatever you say, little . . . er . . . Molly."

She rubbed her arms. "Where am I from? What about family?"

He rose and stood over her. "Enough for now. It's dangerous to push things too soon." He snagged his Stetson off the rack and headed out the door. "I have evening chores."

What he wanted was a straight shot of bourbon, but he wouldn't bend to the family weakness of using alcohol to solve problems. Not tonight. Not ever again. Not if he was smart.



## Chapter Two

*Darn that slippery cowboy!* Molly thought. Every time she tried to dig a little deeper into her past, Matt closed her out. She paced her room for a few minutes and then gave in to an irresistible urge to poke around the ranch house. The rooms were big with massive mahogany furniture and Aztec design scatter rugs over polished quarry tile floors. Everything looked masculine and hard edged, like Matt. Nothing in the decor reflected that a woman lived here. That she lived here.

There had to be evidence of that. She dug through drawers and cabinets, with trembling clammy hands, looking for clues about Matt, herself, and their relationship. Everything was neat—too neat. It was as though someone had meticulously stripped the place of all personal items. If she and Matt had a life together, where were the photographs? The memorabilia?

Damn, she needed to know about herself and her relationship with this disturbing man who worked at cross-purposes against her, although he claimed otherwise. The gun cabinet displayed an arsenal of polished weaponry impressive enough to make the National Rifle Association proud. Anger swelled in her. She hated guns. Hated men who used them.

Fighting a shiver, she stepped down into the sunken living room and admired the imposing limestone fireplace. It almost overpowered the room with its presence much like Matt every time he entered a room. She glanced at the guns again. Had Matt ever killed anyone? Not wanting to ponder that right now, she looked away.

The bar in the corner displayed several dozen varied crystal glasses hanging upside down from a rack. She ran her hand across the black marble top of the bar and noticed that the liquor was locked away in a cabinet. Locked away from whom? From Matt's staff? From her?

Couldn't be her. She had no driving urge to break the lock and guzzle down a shot of anything. The staff, then? If Matt didn't trust his staff, maybe they were corruptible. She tucked that possibility into the back of her mind for potential use later.

She left the living room and headed up the wide spiraling staircase, while trailing her hand along the polished oak banister. Last night, she'd slept alone in the master bedroom adjoining the nursery. There had been no evidence of Matt there. None of his clothes. None of his personal items. Where did he sleep? Heading down the upstairs hall, Molly opened doors and peeked inside each room until she found another master bedroom with the stamp of Matt Ryan on it. Men's clothing hung in the closet. Belts and neckerchiefs hung from a row of hooks, and boots lined a boot rack. Everything had its place. The man was a bloody neatnik. He might like to organize and control every aspect of his life, but no way would she let him control her.

*Why aren't any of my clothes in here? If we're married, is our marriage in trouble?* While she pondered that, a big box in the back of the closet drew her attention. She dragged it out and opened it. Inside were all kinds of personal belongings and framed pictures. None were of her, and none of Sara Jane. The group photograph was no doubt his family. The mom had a wistful smile, and the dad looked stern and unapproachable. The one in the picture who looked

familiar was the lanky teen with brooding eyes—even at such a young age Matt’s defiant expression screamed rebel and danger. The other two boys, with their fingers looped into the waistband of their jeans, were no less rebellious looking.

Molly studied the photograph, delving deeper. If she were married to Matt, why didn’t any of these people trigger some emotion? And why had he stripped the place of all evidence of his family? She needed answers to her questions, and when Matt returned, she wouldn’t let him put her off any longer. She placed the box back into the closet the way she’d found it and then opened a dresser drawer. She shook her head at the neat rows of men’s briefs and socks and had the sudden urge to mess up everything.

A door slammed downstairs. Being caught snooping in his room might not be the best way to start a conversation, she thought with a twinge of guilt. With her heart pounding, she ran and ducked into her own room. Maybe this was where she should’ve looked first.

She opened her dresser drawers, one by one, and discovered all new stuff, underwear, and a few tank tops. She checked the closet. The clothes, free of labels, consisted of a jacket, a couple of cardigans, a coat, several pairs of Levi’s, and some western shirts. If these were her duds, she sure wasn’t a clothes horse. Fingering the fabrics, all bland blues and greens, she searched for tags. She checked all the pockets—not even lint.

Nothing showed wear, and they all revealed the same uninteresting colors. It was as though someone had rush-shopped, grabbing clothes without regard for style, cut, or design. These boring pieces couldn’t be her taste in clothes. There was nothing here to reveal who she was, or that fire burning in her belly.

What was Matt’s game? Did he think she’d knuckle under and willingly turn into some kind of Stepford wife? How did she know that term? She shook her head. She couldn’t keep questioning every random thought. She needed something concrete to go on. The cotton nightgown and terry robe she’d worn last night hung on the hook where she’d left them. At the back of the closet was the suitcase she’d had at the hospital. It contained only a nightshirt, sweats and some underwear. Was that all she’d packed for a shopping trip? Where were her purchases? Was it the western stuff hanging here?

She emptied the suitcase and went through each zipper pocket. She slid her hand into the satin pouch. Her fingers closed over a piece of paper. She pulled it out and inspected the crumpled yellow sticky note with a phone number on it. Her heart began to pound in wild, erratic beats. Whose number could it be? If Matt hadn’t disconnected all the phones, she’d find out in quick order.

Molly dug deeper into the pouch. It was empty except for some old-fashioned bulky knit slippers. They looked comfortable and quiet. She liked the idea of walking around without making noise. After a struggle, she yanked off her boots and shoved a foot into one of the slippers. It was a perfect fit. But Cinderella she wasn’t. The other slipper felt heavy. She pushed her hand inside the toe and found a small velvet pouch, the kind to keep rings in. She turned it upside down and dumped out three sterling silver coins. They looked antique, rare, and valuable. Her heart thudded against her chest. Where did she get them? One thing was sure, until she remembered, they would remain her little secret.

\* \* \* \*

Matt searched the downstairs and assumed from the silence that Molly and Sara Jane had hit the hay early. He harnessed his disappointment. Molly needed lots of rest to get well. But damn it, it was still light out, and he hadn't expected them to go to bed before dark. Feeling letdown and empty, he'd tiptoed back outside.

He saddled up his favorite horse, Gold King. After swinging into the saddle, he urged the horse forward. Gold King trotted down the dirt trail at a steady clip, and Matt kept his eyes alert for broken fencing and stray cattle, but his mind stayed on Molly. He'd never brought anyone from his FBI life to the ranch before. He didn't like mixing the two parts of him, but when he learned that Molly's protectors had been gunned down and that she was in danger, he'd sprung out of semiretirement and broken his own rule without a second thought.

Matt reined in his horse as he approached Alfonso's place, a three-bedroom adobe dwelling located about two miles from the main house. Evening settled slowly over the valley, and the exterior of the adobe took on the purple hue of the distant mountains. The windows glowed with a welcoming light. Tita was on the porch gathering the pies she'd left under nets to cool. Rather than bid him her usual cheery greeting, she sent him an icy glance that he tried not to take to heart.

Tita, at forty-three, didn't look a day over thirty. She was still trim, curvy, and the pride and joy of her husband, Alfonso. The screen door opened, and Alfonso came out on the porch and waved. "Howdy, Matt," he shouted with both Mexican and Texas accents wrestling in his drawl. Due to Alfonso's small, wiry build and funny Chihuahua face, men often wondered how his head vaquero and trusted amigo had lucked out and caught the heart of the former Miss Texas and Rodeo Queen.

Those who knew Alfonso well understood that Tita had fallen for his quick sense of humor and ready smile. Besides, the little guy could charm the needles off a cactus. In spite of his small stature, Alfonso was a giant of a man who ran the ranch with an iron fist. Tita claimed that, with Alfonso's bushy mustache, pointy eyebrows, and big grin, she'd always thought he resembled Cheech Marin. Matt had to agree.

"Hey, *patron*," Alfonso said. Ranch business bring you galloping over here, or the aroma of Tita's pies?"

"Just here to talk a spell." Matt thumbed his Stetson high on his forehead, not yet ready to be more specific. Gold King, gamboling around in a sidestepping jig, moved like a nervous colt beneath him as though sensing Matt's turmoil about the visit. Matt pulled the horse up tight and dismounted.

Alfonso's seventeen-year-old son—and Matt's favorite stable boy—Roberto stopped lassoing the sawhorse he'd set up for practice, looped his lariat over his shoulder, and trudged over to Matt. The boy's hangdog demeanor suggested he'd been caught doing something he considered beneath his budding talents. "I'll see to Gold King."

Gold King snorted, and Matt stroked the sleek neck under the horse's strawberry mane before handing over the reins. Matt patted the boy's shoulder. "Thanks, Roberto. By the way, good roping. I used to practice with a sawhorse myself."

Roberto's eyes lit up with new pride, but he merely nodded. The kid was tall, thin, and quiet—the kind of quiet that made you wonder what he was thinking. The teen got his looks from his mother. He had huge chocolate brown eyes fringed with thick curly lashes, and the intensity of his steady gaze drove the young rodeo *chicas* wild. He was a newcomer to the rodeo circuit, but he'd already won a couple of calf-roping trophies. His charcoal-colored hair, braided back from his face in a rope down his back, emphasized his long thin face and high cheekbones.

"Well, don't just stand there. Come on in," Tita called over her shoulder.

Matt smiled. Piqued or not, Tita was wearing the sterling silver comb he'd given her for her birthday tucked into her chignon. She balanced the pies while Alfonso held the door for her. Following them into the kitchen, Matt inhaled wafts of lemon sauce and Tita's potent lavender scent. He eased into a straight-backed kitchen chair. Tita slammed a fistful of silverware on the table in front of him, which confirmed that she had her back up about something. It took no special smarts to determine that it involved Molly. He exchanged raised-eyebrow looks with Alfonso and braced for the rest of Tita's tirade. She thrust mugs of strong coffee and chunks of lemon meringue pie in front of them, then dropped into a chair and gave Matt a stern look. "Your dictatorial ways may work with the men, Matt Ryan, but not with me," she said, her dark eyes flashing. "If you want me to work in your house around the Señorita, release me from your *loco* code of silence."

With a bite of tart lemon puckering his mouth, Matt stared at her. How could he fault her? He was an authoritarian. He expected those who worked for him to give him complete obedience and loyalty. He'd accept nothing less.

With great drama, Tita touched a spot over her left breast. "It makes my heart ache to pretend that I don't understand what that poor woman says."

The sadness in Tita's tone touched Matt. He'd been unfair. He'd already decided to pull the directive, but Tita would accept his explicit restrictions better if she thought she'd won the first round. "I know. Molly's not taking it too well."

Tita made a sound of disgust and shook her head. "What woman with an ounce of backbone would? And that Señorita's got backbone."

"Okay, okay, you win," Matt said, secretly agreeing with Tita's assessment of Molly. "The silent treatment's off. But listen to me, Tita—this is important. If Molly learns about her past too fast, it could cause a serious setback in her recovery. I don't expect you to back up my lies, but you'll have to sidestep her questions until I give the okay to answer them. Talk about how cute Sara Jane is, recipes, the weather, but nothing to give her the idea that she's not my wife after all. Got it?"

“*Muy mallo*, playing with a woman’s heart. And what about the marriage bed?” Tita asked in her usual blunt manner.

“Until she remembers me and invites me to her bed,” Matt said, “you don’t have to worry about me compromising the lady.”

“Invites you to her bed, eh, Romeo? So cocky, so sure of yourself.” Tita frowned. “Big ladies’ man, just like your brothers.”

Her words hit him like a physical blow, the reverberation sending pain to every cell in his body. “It’s not like that. Molly and I were close once. And—”

Tita thrust the flat of her hand outward to silence him. “No *importante*. A square shooter like you shouldn’t deal in lies. I’m no doctor like that De La Fuente *hombre*, but lies bring *mucho* trouble.”

“I know. I’d give my prize bull to be able to tell Molly everything. But for her sake, I can’t.”

Tita arched a cynical eyebrow. “For her sake? *Madre de Dios!*” Leaving her pie untouched, Tita pushed her plate away and got up bristling. “Men!” She stomped out of the room, her potent lavender scent streaming in her wake.

Alfonso sighed. “She’s right, you know.”

Matt couldn’t argue the point. Tita was right as rain, and he was on a collision course with a situation as unpredictable as a flash flood. Molly valued the truth above anything. That was why she’d been a crack reporter. The Witness Protection Program had forced her to leave her job, but nothing could make her give up her values and high standards. Matt took a sip of his coffee and cursed under his breath. Molly could never love a man she didn’t respect, and his lies would diminish any respect she may have had for him.

His jaw tightened. Did he still have hopes that they would get back together? He’d thought he could walk away for good without looking back—but that was before he’d brought her under his roof. Now, just like last time, to keep her alive, he had to bite the bullet and do something that went one-hundred-eighty degrees against his feelings. This time, he feared he would forever mess up any chance for more between them.

“Tita didn’t mean what she said about your brothers,” Alfonso said. “You’re nothing like them.”

Matt shrugged, not wanting to discuss it.

Alfonso glanced at the clock and tuned the radio to the weather forecast. Both men remained silent until the stockman’s advisory was over. They exchanged glances, and Matt knew by Alfonso’s expression that he, too, was relieved that the predicted storm had detoured.

Alfonso pulled a cigar from his pocket and rolled it between his blunt fingers. “What are you going to do?”

“What I always do. Make a plan and stick to it.” It was his philosophy of life. Regardless of how difficult the follow-through could be sometimes, to deviate begged for trouble.

Alfonso lit up his cigar and took a couple of puffs while watching the door. Matt knew Tita would have a fit if she caught Alfonso smoking in the house. Alfonso took another puff. “Have you heard from Luke or Parker?” he asked.

Matt’s stomach tightened. He didn’t want to think about those two. “I sent Gunther to San Antonio to look for them.”

Sometimes, Matt hated his brothers as much as he loved them. He tried to understand why they’d become alcoholics and ne’er-do-wells. They blamed it on marrying the wrong women. But they’d chased trouble even in their teens, and the family had been pulled apart by their scrapes.

Alfonso sent Matt a sympathetic grin. “Want me to scoot up to the cattle auction and finish the job?”

Under normal circumstances, Matt would have gone himself. He sighed. “I need you here. Send Sam.” Someone had to go. Those two-stepping, ready-fisted, boozing brothers of his wouldn’t be back until they’d blown every cent of the travel expense money and ended up in jail on a DUI or disturbing the peace charge.

Matt tightened his hands around the mug until his flesh felt like it might split. Damn it. Luke and Parker were digging their spurs deeper into his side with each passing day, driving him *loco*. He gave them jobs, which they seldom completed, and he put up with their tomfoolery. And for what?

Alfonso regarded Matt, and the sympathy Matt saw on his foreman’s face made him cringe. He hadn’t known his misery was so obvious. “Don’t be too hard on yourself, patron. You’ve been a saint with those two. No one blames you.”

Matt clenched his teeth. Alfonso was wrong about that. The men resented the double standard of hard-line leadership with them, and bend-over-backward leniency with his brothers.

“A friendly tip, *mi amigo*. Next time, don’t send those two together. They just egg each other on.”

Matt laughed without humor. “I know, but I hoped that just once—” He’d known the risk he was taking, but he’d sent his brothers away so they wouldn’t spill the beans to Molly. After the auction, they were supposed to go out to the west sector and round up late calves and strays. That would’ve kept them busy and out of the way for several weeks.

Alfonso gave Matt an affectionate grin. "Like me, amigo, you love your family. Maybe too much."

\* \* \* \*

Under a moonlit sky, heading for the office in the barn to catch up on paperwork, Matt rode Gold King at a slow pace along the fence line with Alfonso's words still echoing in his head. Was it love or guilt behind the extra leeway he'd given his brothers?

He frowned and cursed under his breath. He'd give a year of his life not to be caught in the triangle between his brothers and his parents. Matt couldn't blame his parents for signing the ranch over to him. After his dad's second heart attack, his parents wanted out from under the ranch and away from the high stress of dealing with two screw-up sons and their constant problems. Now the folks were enjoying life in a retirement community in Florida. And he was stuck here.

Their decision had affected his career, and he'd gone into semiretirement. Now he'd been dragged back into the middle of things and was being pulled in several directions. He had his duty to the Feds, which was all tangled up in his desire to protect Molly and her baby, duty to the family which included duty to the ranch and handling his brothers. He hoped he didn't crack under the pressure.

After the documents were signed, Luke and Parker got even harder to deal with. Matt understood it, but he sure as hell resented it. He'd been running the ranch with Alfonso's help for the last five years anyway. Even when away on FBI assignments, he had to keep daily hands-on contact, and keeping all the various sacks of manure from splitting wide open was taking its toll. Damn it, he'd never wanted all the responsibility of the ranch, and he'd be glad to share it with Parker and Luke, if they ever shaped up.

It scared Matt that sometimes, underneath his tight control, he felt just like them. Edgy. Restless. Wild. Of his two brothers, he was more like Luke, the youngest, a rebel and a scrapper, and Matt did constant battle with that side of himself. In a search for intrigue and his own identity, he'd gone into undercover fieldwork for the federal government. Even that pursuit of danger and justice was wearing thin.

In the last few years, he'd thought that if he could just find the right woman to share his life with, everything would be okay. He'd settle down and start a family. But his, perhaps unreasonable, pickiness and his fear of making a mistake kept him single. That might have turned out for the best because between his Fed job and the ranch, he had no time to be a husband and father anyway.

He forced a chuckle. Why should he make just one gal miserable when he could give a whole passel of fillies good times? Big talk. He hadn't been with anyone since Molly. She was the one who came closest to making him chuck all the old fears. He loved her soft heart, her honesty, and the magic that sizzled between them when they were together. He knew that his feelings about her, about his whole damned life, defied logic. If Molly hadn't had to go into the Witness Protection Program, and if he could've dumped all his responsibilities, he would've chucked his worries about passing on the family weakness and married her.

Perhaps it was a good thing that the obstacles had stood in their way. It was best to go on fighting relationships with women. He gripped the reins until the leather cut into his palms. Damn the fear. Because of it, he'd no doubt end up alone.

Matt shook his head. He faced danger every day in his FBI work, and he never feared dying—just dying alone like Grandfather Worland. Grandpa, a drinker, gambler, and always broke, had no doubt provided the pattern for the family weakness. Matt had loved the old man, pitied him, but he'd never admired him. Matt's throat constricted. What if he, like his brothers, had some of Grandpa's irresponsible genes? Only constant, rigid control would keep him from fouling up like the patriarchal drunkard—a fate, in Matt's mind, worse than death.

\* \* \* \*

It was dark outside, and Molly hadn't seen Matt since suppertime. If she hadn't had her own agenda, she might have resented being left alone for so long without an explanation. Instead, his absence worked in her favor. Molly tapped the wood panel at the back of her closet until she heard a hollow sound. She loosened the paneling enough to slip her hand into the space and hid the velvet pouch containing the three coins in the small cubbyhole. After tapping the wood back in place with the handle of a screwdriver, she slipped the tool and the mysterious phone number into the back of her lingerie drawer to keep them handy for quick use.

She started at Sara Jane's sudden cries. "Coming, sweetie," she called, rushing down the hall to the nursery. When she lifted Sara Jane from the crib, it was obvious the baby needed changing. Molly took care of the job in quick order. Then, with Sara Jane in her arms, she headed for the kitchen, got a bottle from the refrigerator, and heated it.

Molly returned to the nursery and settled into the well-worn rocking chair to feed Sara Jane. In rhythm with the creaking chair, something elusive dipped in and out of the shadowy edges of Molly's mind. Why couldn't she bring it forward? Despite what Matt had told her of their supposed life together, she couldn't quite believe him, but was uncertain why.

From the radio Molly had left on in the adjoining room, Chris Isaak belted out a country ballad, and Molly hummed the melody. Blast it. She had to discover who she was. Maybe she and Sara Jane had a wonderful life waiting for them somewhere. Perhaps, if she made a mental list of what she knew about herself, something new might shake out. She needed logic, consistency, and definition in her life, and damn it, that Neanderthal cowboy who claimed to be her husband wasn't giving it to her.

She had an urge to write everything down. She had a strong feeling that paper and pen would provide the connection to her past that she needed. Right after she rocked Sara Jane back to sleep, she would find some paper.

She looked down at Sara Jane sucking on the nipple of the bottle. Overwhelming love burst forth, and she knew she'd die to protect this baby. It was with that thought that something dark and menacing slid across the edges of her memory. She shivered. Was Sara Jane in



danger? The baby's eyelids drooped and closed. Her mouth stilled, and Molly rocked her a few more minutes before putting her back into the crib.

Molly headed back to the kitchen and rummaged through the small desk by the counter. She came up with a pen and pad and began to write with fierce, unleashed passion. Although she wrote nothing but questions, it felt so right to get something—anything—down on paper.

What was her philosophy of life? "Show no fear," echoed in her head. Did she have something to fear? Matt? She knew by her anger at his evasions that truth was very important to her, and she sensed Matt was withholding it from her. Why?

Something icy curled through her, and it occurred to her that she was a little afraid of the answer. Her wedding ring glinted. She had the oddest feeling that slipping the ring on her finger had affected Matt on some deep level. He had gotten all choked, and his eyes looked like those of a man going off a high dive for the first time. What did that mean? Was he very much in love with her? Or was their marriage a sham? Had she guessed the truth earlier, that being married to him was what had caused the supposed stress which had led to her temporary amnesia? He said he was her husband, yet in her gut that revelation didn't quite ring true. So who was he? Who was Matt Ryan within the depths of his soul?

His facade of sometimes dictator, sometimes nice guy confused her as much as her own identity. She'd just scratched the surface of Matt Ryan, and found herself intrigued and frightened. Yet, something buried within her hungered to know all the facets of this complicated man.

First, she had to figure out who she was. Oh, God. What if she couldn't find herself? What if she had to stay in this nowhere-land, in this emptiness without memories, where she only had stories about herself—perhaps manufactured by Matt for his own purposes? She felt so adrift and disconnected from the world. *Why?* She couldn't give up. Wouldn't give up. *Please, God, don't let me crash into a blank wall.*

The phone number she'd found might be a clue. She needed a phone. Matt couldn't run a working ranch like this without phone contact. She made a mental note to look in the bunkhouse and the office in the barn—

Loud banging on the side door startled her. She hurried across the kitchen into the mud room and listened at the door, while wishing for a peephole. It was dark outside and late for callers. "Who is it?" she asked, hating the tremor in her voice.

Maybe with the persistent banging, the caller couldn't hear her. If the person didn't stop that racket, Sara Jane would wake up, darn it! Molly looked around for a weapon to protect herself and the sleeping baby. Why did she think they needed protection?

She considered the row of gleaming knives in the wall holder. A chill shot up her spine when an image of blood-spattered walls darted into her mind. The image came and went so fast, she couldn't draw a bead on it, but she knew she didn't want to touch the knives. She grabbed the handle of the pan of water she'd put on to heat for tea and held it tight, ready to fling the liquid if she had to.

Molly opened the door and gasped at the sight of the man standing before her. Under his black hat, tipped high on his forehead, his face was a collage of blue bruises and bloody abrasions. He had a swollen red welt along his jaw and a wicked cut that zigzagged up to his left eye and oozed blood, which had splattered his white western shirt with crimson splotches.

Beneath the bruised, lacerated face and swollen eye, he bore a striking resemblance to Matt. The man was younger and leaner, but they were stallions from the same mare. She set aside the pan of boiling water. She wouldn't need protection against the man she assumed was Matt's younger brother. Why didn't he have his own key? Considering the shape he was in, perhaps he'd lost it. Maybe the brothers weren't on good terms.

"Where's Matt?" he slurred. "I need his help." He reeked of whiskey and sweat. His eyes were glassy. "I gotta sit down," he said, lunging forward across the threshold into her arms. It was too late to decide if she wanted to ask him in. Stumbling, he took her with him as he propelled toward the kitchen, his weight draped over her, using her as an unwilling crutch. At the kitchen table, she pulled out a straight-backed chair, and he slumped into it, relieving Molly of her considerable burden. She snagged his hat and set it aside, out of his reach.

"Hey, gimme that back. A cowboy's naked without his hat."

She needed the hat off to get to his wounds. "A gentleman takes his hat off in the house," she said, hoping to tease him into forgetting his cowboy nonsense.

He grinned. It was lopsided, comical. "Who sez I'm a gent, sweet thing?"

Unwilling to pursue that risky subject, she lifted his chin and examined the damage. "You're banged up pretty bad, friend."

"Name's Luke, sweet stuff," he drawled. His tanned face seemed to pale under the artificial light, and he was sweating. "Got any beer?"

"Alcohol's the last thing you need, Luke. After I get you fixed up, I'll brew you some strong coffee." She dampened a hand towel and wiped the blood from his face, while trying to determine how badly he was hurt.

He measured Molly, as though he had trouble focusing his eyes. "Hey, pretty nurse, wanta kiss my hurts?" He snaked his hands around her waist as if they belonged there. He was young and cocky with a serious case of what-a-stud-I-am fever.

"Clearly you're not as badly hurt as you look," she said, twisting away. "What happened to you, anyway?"

"Li'l disagreement over an ace of spades." He reached for her again.

She stepped back and got some ice from the refrigerator, wrapped it in a towel, and handed it to him. "Put this on your eye. It'll help reduce the swelling." She glared at him and shook a finger in his face. "And stay put. I'll get something for those cuts."

She returned in quick order with disinfectant and cotton balls she'd found in the downstairs bathroom and went to work on his face. The gash was wide and still oozed blood. "You might need stitches. Is there a doctor nearby?"

He laughed. "There's a vet on the ranch. But I want you *to take care of me*." He yanked Molly down on his lap and tried to kiss her.

"No!" Molly struggled, but she couldn't get loose. For someone who looked like a bull had kicked him repeatedly in the face, he was frisky as a colt and dangerous as a wild stallion. "Look, cowboy," she said, ready to hurt him if she had to, "let go or—"

Behind Luke, Matt charged through the door from the mud room full tilt. He lifted Molly away, and grabbed the drunken cowboy by the scuff of his neck. "Damn you, Luke. When a woman says no, she means no! Got that?" Matt drew his fist back, ready to pound what was left of Luke's face into mush.

"Matt, don't!" Molly said. "Luke's face can't take any more punishment. And I'm okay."

Tension crackled in the air. Matt's arm remained poised for battle, but he looked at Luke's face as if seeing it for the first time. He shoved him back into the chair, showing no gentleness, but the glint of anger in his earth-brown eyes waned.

A strand of Luke's hair had fallen across his forehead, which made him look boyish and vulnerable.

Matt's glare gentled, then hardened again. "Molly," he growled, "this is my brother Luke." He glared daggers at his brother. "In the future, keep your dirty paws off my wife." Matt's low, hoarse drawl rumbled through Molly like distant thunder, making her knees weak.

Luke's mouth fell open. "Wife!"

Matt grabbed Luke's chin and squeezed it. "Yeah, wife."

Molly's ears perked up. Shouldn't Matt's brother know about the marriage if she and Matt were married?

Tilting his head, Matt examined Luke's face. "You need stitches. Haul your sorry butt out of that chair and let's have the doc take a look. You don't want permanent scars on that pretty-boy face." Matt draped Luke's arm around his neck and helped him to his feet. He snagged Luke's hat from the table and shoved it on Luke's head. The rolled brim of Matt's own hat shaded his expression.

Molly watched in dismay. In their hip-hugging faded blue Levi's and black Stetsons, the brothers staggered out the door without another word to her. She felt like an outsider, closed

out by a relationship she didn't understand. One minute Matt was ready to pound his brother into mincemeat, the next he was his best buddy.

Damn Matt, he was leaving her again without even a good-bye. Again? She jumped on the word like a starving lioness would leap on her prey. Had Matt left her before? Was that why she got so angry every time she looked at him?

He'd told her very little about their relationship. What kind of man was she married to? Was he a heavy drinker like his brother? She remembered the locked liquor cabinet. She felt mixed emotions about him—anger, fear, curiosity, and—as much as she hated to admit it—even attraction. But she didn't feel married.

### Chapter Three

Molly fought the dream at first, then found herself giving into it. Silvery moonlight highlighted their nude bodies. Matt traced a hand down her throat, and everything stilled inside. His touch, though tender, caught her in an unyielding hold. He kissed her and the warm, soft pressure lulled her into willing submission. She reveled in the lean hardness of him as she trailed her fingers over his broad, muscular back, chest, shoulders, and then entwined them in his hair to pull him closer. She felt the drive of their dual madness. He ravaged her mouth, and she drew him deeper unable to get enough of him. A moist throbbing in her core pulsed hot and insistent. “Matt, now please!”

Her cry woke her to a world of sunshine beaming through a slit in the drapes. She burned with desire—her face with embarrassment. What if someone had heard her? *Oh, God, what if Matt heard me?* She didn’t want to want him. Husband or not, he was a stranger, a controlling stranger who might be dangerous.

She leaped from the bed and headed for the shower. She turned on the cold water full blast. After regaining a smidgeon of control, she dressed and headed for the nursery. The crib was empty! Instant panic gripped her. Why did an empty crib always set her heart to pounding?

Sara Jane is fine, she told herself, even as she dashed to the kitchen. Relief shot through her, and she began to breathe again when she found her baby propped in the high chair. She looked adorable in that cotton sleeper and bib, her face all smiles, drooling a bit. Love, powerful and all-consuming, squeezed Molly’s heart. Barely glancing at Tita, she wiped away the drool with a nearby washcloth. The empty bowl and empty bottle told her that Tita had fed Sara Jane. Molly lifted the baby from the chair and, holding the little one so tight that the tot wriggled in protest, Molly hugged and kissed her.

“Good morning, Señora,” Tita said, smiling.

“Er . . . Good morning,” Molly said. *Tita is talking to me!* Stunned, Molly returned Sara Jane to the high chair, wondering what had happened since yesterday.

“Señor Matt said to let you sleep in.” Tita poured orange juice and coffee then pulled out a chair and gestured to it. “*Por favor*, sit down.”

Inhaling the tempting aromas of bacon and something sweet, she complied.

“Señor Matt has already eaten and is out doing chores.” Tita removed a plate of waffles from the warmer and served Molly.

Molly cleared her throat. “Thank you,” she said, feeling like a guest. But she wasn’t a guest—not if she was married to Matt. So where did she fit in? Wasn’t she supposed to be the cohead of this household? “Don’t I usually do the cooking?” Molly asked while smearing strawberry preserves on a waffle.

Tita shook her head. “Cooking and cleaning are my jobs. I come in at four in the morning and get Señor Matt fed and out the door. Then I clean and go home by noon. I come back

for a couple of hours to make dinner.” She paused from wiping off the stove. “But feel free to do whatever you want.”

“Matt said you cared for Sara Jane while I was away. Who takes care of her when you leave?”

“Don’t worry. Señor Matt makes sure there is always someone reliable here to care for her.”

Molly wanted to pursue that more, but too many questions might make Tita clam up again. “Well, I appreciate the wonderful care you’ve given to her.”

“I enjoyed it. I haven’t had a baby around for years. And it’s part of my job. So whenever you need me . . .”

Molly nodded her gratitude. She liked taking care of Sara Jane herself, but it was comforting to know that Tita would help in a pinch. In fact, Molly thought, as the irking issue of the disconnected phones popped to the forefront of her mind, she might take her up on the offer right away. Molly began to tap the plate with her knife.

“Do you need something else, Señora?”

“Oh. No. I’m sorry,” she said, and put the knife down. “Dealing with Señor Matt tends to make me a tad uptight, which brings me to the phone issue. Tita, why are the phones disconnected?”

Tita frowned. “Ask Señor Matt. I have no idea why he does these things.”

Molly wanted to ask if he’d always been so controlling, but she had to get the phone issue settled while he was gone; regaining her memory just might be on the line. “Where can I find a working phone?”

Tita’s expression darkened, and she didn’t say anything for several seconds as though debating the wisdom of answering. “The closest one is in the office in the barn. But who would you call? You have amnesia, no?”

Molly felt her nerves tighten. She liked asking questions, but didn’t like answering them. “Perhaps my doctor.”

The worry lines in Tita’s face eased. “Of course. I didn’t mean to pry. It’s just that we are all so worried about you. Especially Señor Matt.”

“Señor Matt worries too much.”

Tita laughed. “Sí. He does. But he means well, and his heart is as big as Texas.” She paused. “Don’t be too hard on him. He has many responsibilities.”

Molly shoved away the wave of guilt. She hadn’t asked to be one of those responsibilities. “Well, I intend to lighten his burden beginning today.” She didn’t know how, but if she was going to be a part of this ranch, she intended to do her share. But first, she had to get to a

phone. Molly took a gulp of coffee and rolled her waffle into a fruity spool to eat on the run. She gave Tita an impish smile. "I have a sudden urge to inhale some barn odors. Would you please watch Sara Jane a little longer?"

Tita chuckled. "Si. It will be my pleasure. But if you take things into your own hands, Señor Matt won't like it."

Molly gave Tita an impulsive hug and kissed Sara Jane. "Señor Matt doesn't need to know."

\* \* \* \*

Matt and his foreman, Alfonso, loped along side by side, riding the flat plains of the ranch, the terrain punctuated here and there by pockets of brush and mesquite. They inspected windmills, fences, and cattle while discussing ways to set up extra safeguards against hoof and mouth and mad cow diseases. After they finished their inspection and covered the necessary topics, Matt said, "I'll see you back at the ranch." He veered his quarter horse away and settled into his own thoughts.

The heat of the day inched upward, warmed the billowing wind. By noon, the temperature would stall around one hundred degrees Fahrenheit and make the air hot, thick, and inescapable. He didn't mind. For the most part the arid climate here in South Texas, the Land of the Sun, gave him eleven months of favorable weather, which was a plus in ranching. Matt wiped the sweat and dirt from his neck with a red paisley kerchief. It was a perfect afternoon to take Molly out to Verde Creek. The more he thought about the idea, the better he liked it. The outing could work as his apology for last night.

In retrospect, he felt rotten for leaving Molly standing in the middle of the kitchen without even a parting good night. At the time, however, all he could think about was getting Luke out of there before his loose-tongued brother said something to make Molly start questioning their marriage again. She'd always been so perceptive; she knew something was wrong. He wished he could tell her everything. For her safety, it all had to come back slowly or the trauma of the bloody murders, the kidnapping, and the fact that she and her baby were still in danger would re-trigger the fear. Then all they had gained in the recovery process would be down the tubes, and she might end up in blackness for life.

Tightening his hands on the reins, Matt felt as though a rod had been rammed up his spine, which made him sit in the saddle more rigidly than usual. The less Molly and Luke talked the better. That's why, after the veterinarian, the ranch's stand-in medical man, said Luke could ride if he took it easy, Matt sent him out to the west sector to supervise the rounding up of strays.

The image of his brother's hands on Molly filled Matt with seething rage. He dug his heels into Gold King's flanks with too much severity, and the quarter horse tossed his head in protest and bolted forward. "Sorry, boy," Matt muttered. Damn that Luke. He had no business treating any woman with such disrespect. Especially Molly. If she hadn't stopped Matt, he would've made his brother eat the tile floor. Matt knew he had no right to be jealous, but when it came to Molly his feelings were irrational. He'd thought he'd gotten over her, but he hadn't. She was the only woman he'd ever been involved with who'd challenged

him, kept his mind sharp and kept him on his toes. Her intelligence and curious nature were terrific qualities for a reporter. Now those traits could get them killed.

\* \* \* \*

Molly raced toward the barn clutching the slip of paper with the mysterious phone number on it. The deep, azure blue sky was free of haze, its sharp clarity defining everything in razor edges. She gave the slip of paper a ferocious squeeze, counting on the phone call to return her memory to equal clarity.

Noises of ranch machinery gave a hum of activity to the hot, dry morning. Men would be working in the barn. Would one of them try to stop her from making the call? From the shed, a leathery Mexican man of about sixty rode a tractor, towing what looked like a generator on a flatbed wagon. He waved, and she waved back.

She nodded at the two vaqueros leading their horses from the barn toward the road. They smiled and tipped their straw hats. Did they know her? Had she actually lived on this farm? It all felt so unfamiliar. It seemed Matt had lifted the silent treatment, and warmth spread through her at the thought. Then, guilt twisted through her for going behind his back. But it was his fault. He shouldn't have disconnected the phones to begin with. She had every right to use the telephone. She'd lost her memory, but she wasn't a child and wouldn't allow herself to be treated like one.

Molly glanced around, then slipped into the barn. Sunlight swept through a window in the haymow and spilled onto a pile of golden hay. No one was around. With her heart pounding, she found the office, also unoccupied, and crept inside. She spied a half-full mug of coffee on the desk and found it to be warm to the touch. That and the partly eaten biscuit on a napkin suggested that the person who'd left the snack would return soon. She grabbed the receiver of the telephone, and let out a sigh of relief when she heard the dial tone. What would she say when she reached the person on the other end of the line? If she recognized the voice, she'd take a direct approach. If not, she'd have to play it by ear. Maybe playing telephone solicitor would work. The way she'd wheedled the location of a phone from Tita suggested that she might be good at drawing information from people. She closed her eyes for courage, then opened them, and punched in the number.

*"Buenos dias,"* a deep resonant Latin voice said. Nothing about the charming Spanish accent sounded familiar. Darn, that cancelled out plan one, which forced her to move on to plan two—getting his name and address. From there, she could either hire a detective to take pictures of the guy, or go to the man's home or office herself and see if he looked familiar. What excuse could she use to get his address? She'd have to offer to send him something. But what? Then, like magic, it came to her. "Sir, my company is giving away a free trip to Hawaii." Again, she had the distinct feeling she'd extracted information from people before.

"Hawaii? Free?" he asked, sounding wary.

She kept glancing at the doorway and listening for footsteps. "Right. All you have to do to win the trip is answer three easy questions." How would she finance this insanity? Did she even have any cash of her own? Oh, well, she'd worry about that later. "There are two



requirements, sir. You have to be the person listed on the phone bill, and give your name and address.”

The line went silent. The silence continued for so long that if she hadn’t heard low background music she would have thought he’d hung up. She started trembling. Time was ticking by—the biscuit eater could return at any moment and catch her on the phone. Molly’s heartbeat pulsed in her ears. Should she have been more direct and asked for this guy’s help? She had his phone number, why didn’t she recognize his voice? If he’d recognized hers, he’d have said so. Or would he? She shuddered. It was hell not knowing who to trust. “Are you still there, sir?”

“*Claro*, of course,” he said. “Now let me get this right—” He repeated the deal she’d offered in a cat-and-mouse kind of mocking tone that made her glad she hadn’t been more direct.

Her throat felt dry. “That’s it,” she said. “Simple as pie. If you’re the person listed on the phone bill, we’re in business. Are you?”

“Si,” he said, his tone still wary. “But this sounds too good to be true. What is the catch, *Señorita*?”

Ignoring her desire to slam the phone down, she pressed on. “No catch. Now, before we get to the questions, I need your name and address.”

The name he gave was Carlos Martinez with a Dallas address. She verified the spelling twice after scribbling down the information. She had what she needed—*Hang up now*, she told herself. But what if a little more conversation could jog her memory? With that seductive thought drawing her in, she stayed on the line.

“Now that I’ve introduced myself,” he said in that mocking tone that was beginning to set her teeth on edge, “it’s your turn, *Señorita*. Give me your name.”

In spite of the feeling that a few more words might trigger something in her brain, she trusted him less and less. Even if she were certain that she was Molly Ryan, she wouldn’t give him that name. She glanced at the picture on the calendar on the wall. A donkey was winding up a mountain path in the rain. Rain. Mountain. “Rainy Montoya,” she said without guilt.

“What a delightful name,” he said. “You know, *bonita*, you have a unique voice.

*Unique, oh, no.* A chill slid up her spine. *Does he recognize it?*

“I could fall in love with the music of your speech. When I win this contest, do me the honor of accompanying me to Hawaii,” he said in a tone as smooth as Sangria wine.

She sensed he was toying with her. She rubbed her arm and forced a laugh. “Not so fast. First the questions.”

“Ask away, *bonita*.”

*Oh, God. Now I have to come up with something.* Again, she had an urge to hang up, but she might need to talk to him after she verified his name and address, so she kept up the game. Frantic, she looked around. Her scan stopped on the calendar again. She flipped the pages and gleaned her questions from the blurb under a picture of The Alamo. “Name the capital of Texas, the state’s nickname, and the state flower.”

He laughed. “Such easy questions, bonita. Austin, Lone Star State, and the bluebonnet.”

Darn, taking her questions from the calendar had been dumb. If she had her memory back, maybe she could have come up with something better. She tried several times to bring the conversation to a close. He seemed reluctant to let her go. He told her that this was the first time he’d ever won anything. He went on about an uncle winning big in the state lottery. *Delaying tactics?*

She had to interrupt him to end the call. When she hung up, she was shaking. The Latin Romeo’s delaying tactics didn’t feel right. What if he could trace her number? Don’t panic, she told herself. Maybe it would be okay. She pushed her uneasiness to the back of her mind and called Directory Assistance. Her heart sank when the mysterious phone number didn’t match the name and address the Latin Romeo had given to her. Now she was more worried than before. He’d given her the wrong information. Why? Was he someone from her past she should fear? If he had caller ID, could he pinpoint her location? Could she somehow have blocked him from getting this number? Well, it was too late to worry about that now. *He kept me on the phone a long time.* The thought echoed in her brain. She shuddered, now convinced that her call had been a terrible mistake. She’d given him the opportunity to trace her call, and she had learned nothing specific about him.

\* \* \* \*

The ranch loomed ahead—his prize, and his curse, Matt thought. He spied Roberto in one of the corrals taking his horse, Kickapoo, through quickstepping barrel race traces. The teen and his horse made a smooth loop around a barrel at breakneck speed and continued the figure eight around a second barrel. Then, Roberto closed the top of a cloverleaf and looped again. Matt wished he had his stopwatch with him. If he was any judge of time and skill—and he was—the boy would walk away with a trophy at the Rancher’s Rodeo next week.

Images of past rodeos played in Matt’s mind—the clowns, the music, the cold-sweat excitement in the chutes. He’d done it all—ridden the wild broncos, wrestled steers, roped and branded cattle, handled horses, and roped calves. He grinned, thinking of the twenty first-prize trophies and half-dozen scars and healed broken bones he had to prove it.

Roberto looked up, and Matt made a strong, closed-fist sign of approval. The wide smile that spread across the teenager’s face warmed Matt’s heart.

Matt had almost reached the barn when he saw Molly slip out the door. She glanced around with a guilty look. Matt yanked on the reins, and before Gold King could come to a complete stop, he dismounted on the run, his saddle leather groaning with the off-balance shift of weight. “What the hell were you doing in there?”

Gold King halted and stomped in place. Matt clenched his teeth and waited for Molly to answer. Electricity crackled in the still air, broken only by his horse's stomping hooves. In his work, trust was a major thing, but in Molly's confused state, he could only trust her to make more trouble for them.

A swift flush rose in Molly's cheeks. She hesitated, and then smiled. "Looking for you, of course. How's Luke?"

Molly's hair, a tumble of auburn waves, glinted in the sunlight and cascaded about her shoulders when she approached. Her slim body, softened by curves, moved as fluidly as quicksilver. The anger flowed out of Matt like flash flood waters. He had to stop assuming the worst. "Luke'll live. He sends his apologies for last night." Matt caught the bridle and rubbed the horse's nose. Molly was so close now that he could smell her flower-scented shampoo. "I want you to go somewhere with me. Verde Creek. I thought we could take a picnic."

She shaded her eyes from the sun. "Do I know that place? Will it help me remember?"

Matt took off his black Stetson and slapped it against his thigh, shaking out a cloud of dust. "It's worth a try."

He winced inside. Of course, Molly couldn't remember a place she'd never seen before, but for some reason, he wanted to share his haven with her—let it work its magic, and maybe she'd relax enough to allow the healing process to begin.

Roberto dismounted, vaulted the corral fence, and ran toward them. Matt winked at the boy. "The trophy's in the bag, pardner." He introduced Roberto to Molly. The teen blushed and dug the toe of his boot into the dirt. Matt slapped the reins into the boy's calloused hand, amused how easily Molly had bewitched the boy. "Get Gold King ready for another ride, and saddle up Starlight for Molly. We'll be leaving in about half an hour."

Roberto saluted and led Gold King toward the barn.

"I'll get Sara Jane ready," Molly said.

The look of love on Molly's face touched Matt, and he hated to disappoint her. "This afternoon it'll be just you and me."

She frowned. "I don't feel comfortable leaving her."

Matt understood. Regardless of the amnesia, Molly, in her subconscious, hadn't forgotten that her baby had been kidnapped. But the kidnappers didn't know about the ranch. "Sara Jane'll be in good hands. For extra protection, I'll have Roberto stay in the house until we get back."

Molly hesitated.

“This afternoon’s gonna be a scorcher. A little filly like Sara Jane will be better off in the air-conditioned house.”

Matt knew that Molly couldn’t argue with that, and for the baby’s sake, she’d agree to leave her behind.

\* \* \* \*

Within a half hour, Molly met Matt at the barn. His inky hair, still wet from a quick shower, curled at his collar. He wore his trademark hip-hugging jeans and a fresh, long-sleeved white shirt, rolled high on muscled forearms. He settled his Stetson high on his head, looking all cowboy and too rugged and handsome for his own good—and if she were honest, for her own good.

He grinned. “Ready?” He was leading Gold King and Starlight by the bridles.

She nodded and forced a smile. *Not really*, she thought. She trembled, thinking about going out into the wilderness with a man she knew so little about. Why hadn’t she refused to go? Curiosity? The tenacious seductive hope that she would learn something about their past . . . something that would trigger her memory?

As though her apprehension of being alone in an isolated spot with a man she couldn’t remember and didn’t trust wasn’t enough, there was another big problem—the horse.

She stared at it without going any closer. Her heart raced. Starlight looked almost as big as Gold King and just as dangerous. “I don’t think I know how to ride.” She hated the tremor in her voice.

Matt brought the horses to her. “I’ll talk you through. All you need is a few basics.”

“Basics,” she repeated, skeptical. He rattled on, something about posture and about how to slip the reins through two fingers—then the ranch faded away, leaving only the hum of his voice and his earth brown eyes staring into hers.

Then, he laughed and said, “But most important, stay on the horse and watch out for low branches.”

Fear of the horse and a sudden unexplainable desire for Matt battled within Molly, setting her cheeks on fire. Unable to speak, she nodded.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll be right beside you. Put your left foot in the stirrup.”

She stood frozen. “Here, let me help you.” He touched her thighs in preparation to boost her onto the sand-colored quarter horse. The heat of his fingers burned through the heavy material of her jeans. “Grab the saddle horn, lean forward, and throw your right leg over.”

She took a deep breath and did as he instructed. To her surprise, she slid with ease into the saddle. Her fleeting satisfaction disappeared when she looked down. It was a long way to the ground. She clenched the saddle horn with a white-knuckled grip.

Matt adjusted the stirrups for her. "Starlight is a good-natured horse." Matt patted the quarter horse on its rump and handed Molly the reins. "You two should get along just fine." Matt swung smoothly onto Gold King. The way he slid his lean hips into the saddle sent a surge of desire through Molly.

Along with a picnic basket, she noticed the rifle lashed to Gold King's rump. "Expecting trouble?"

Matt shook his head. "Nah, but preparedness is part of ranch life." He urged Gold King ahead, and as though trained to do so, Starlight followed.

She frowned at the gun, then looked at Matt. He moved with his horse, riding the saddle leather in a masterful and mesmerizing rhythm. Molly's heartbeat accelerated. She forced her attention to what she hoped would be a safer place to look. Sunlight glistened on Matt's inky hair—images came to mind of a wild black stallion, muscles tensed for conquest. Her breath caught. Even though he claimed to be her husband, she didn't want to have these feelings. Not until she was sure what was going on.

She took a deep breath, taking in heady smells of earth and animals, and forced herself to study the surroundings. From flat ranch land to rocky bluffs and purple mountains, nothing looked familiar. She couldn't see herself in this land, but she could see Matt here. It suited him. Wild. Untamed. Still, he was a contradiction—while no one could control him, he held a tight rein on himself and those around him.

Earlier this morning in the barn when she'd made the telephone call, she'd been lucky. If Matt had gotten there a minute or two sooner, the situation could have been difficult.

Matt slowed Gold King, and Starlight moved up parallel to the stallion. Molly's search for something to say failed. What did a man like Matt think about? Was he even aware that she rode beside him? She cast sideways glances at him when he wasn't looking. Darn him, she couldn't deny that his hard edge fascinated her.

She'd been concentrating so hard on Matt that she wasn't aware when the terrain changed to rougher, more desolate land. Her arms prickled. The silence between them unnerved her. "You keep the ranch looking sharp. It must be tough. I suppose cattle ranching is a complex business?"

Bringing his horse unnecessarily close, Matt locked gazes with Molly for several seconds. "It takes commitment. And determination." His passion for the ranch sent shivers up her spine.

She didn't feel comfortable with him riding so close. She forced herself to ignore the flush burning her cheeks. "Sounds like you have a love affair going with the ranch." Molly frowned. Maybe that was why she didn't feel married—her husband was married to his spread.

“I’ll be the first to admit it’s hard work with long hours. But there’s something about it that gets to me.”

Molly frowned. She and Matt operated on different wavelengths. He had a tender spot in his heart for this place, and she felt trapped here. How had they ever gotten together?

Starlight and Gold King ambled side by side in an easy gait, following the fence line past grazing cattle. Rangeland sprouted with life. Blades of thin, brown bluestem and the state grass, sideoats grama, stretched across the sandy pastures. Mesquite thickets twisted in tangled patches. Molly wiped her wrist across her forehead. “It’s a wonder anything grows in this heat.”

Matt laughed. “There’s a simple South Texas wisdom—land has limitations. It’s a serious life-or-death balancing act to live in this fragile environment. But there’s no crowding—just unlimited raw, barren land all the way to the base of the mountains.”

“You really love it out here, don’t you?”

He shrugged. “Running the ranch has always been about responsibility, not love.”

She tilted her head and grinned. “Well, if you didn’t have the responsibility, I’ll bet you’d stay anyway. You’re such a part of all this that I can’t tell where you begin and the land ends.”

\* \* \* \*

Molly’s words hit Matt with the force of a stampede. It was true, he thought. The FBI fieldwork no longer filled his needs like it had when he was younger. He was fed up with living out of suitcases alone in hotel rooms. Tired of not having a life. “Maybe you’re right. I curse this place when I’m here, but I miss it like hell when I’m gone.”

Her eyes brightened, making her look instantly alert. “Gone? When were you gone? And where did you go?”

He swore under his breath. Even simple comments brought tangled questions. “Remember, I told you. I rode the rodeo circuit for a while.”

“Oh.” She sounded disappointed.

He hadn’t expected her to react this way to his curt answer—the chin that surged up, the palpable way she drew a protective veneer over her emotions. He felt like a heel, but it was necessary to let the subject die. Her words about him being a part of the land replayed over and over at the edges of his mind. Instead of bothering him, they soothed him.

They passed grazing cattle. With new insight, rather than seeing them as a burden, Matt saw them as an opportunity to carve out an important niche for himself. This ranch mattered to scores of people, and he could make the place grow into something substantial, something worthwhile to pass on to his children.

Children. He could see himself with a son like Roberto and a beautiful daughter like Sara Jane.

Suddenly happier than he'd been in a long time, Matt began to sing a cowhand range song: "Oh say, little doggie, when will you lay down, and give up this shifting and roving around? My horse is leg-weary, and I'm plumb tired, but if you get away, I'm sure to be fired. Lay down, little doggie, lay down."

Molly laughed and joined in on the second chorus. Matt felt as though he might burst with happiness. When he'd brought Molly to the ranch, he'd thought it the only thing he could do under the circumstances. He realized now that his heart had been involved in the decision, and he wanted her to stay.

She no doubt hated this arid country, and when she remembered her past, she'd leave. Matt tried to visualize things from her viewpoint. The hot wind whistled a mean refrain. On a slight rise in the land, a cluster of windmills beat the air with angry wings.

\* \* \* \*

Molly followed Matt's gaze. "Why all the windmills?" She didn't mind the heat so much now, or the wind whipping her hair. And for some reason, Matt no longer frightened her.

"We use them to pump water for cattle." Matt pointed to an edifice that seemed fatter and squatter than the others. "Ol' Carlita is a real antique."

"What? You name your windmills?" Singing, naming windmills—she liked the sense of fun buried deep in this cowboy. Liked it a lot.

"Names are easier to remember than numbers. The vaqueros would rather check out Carlita than plain ol' number sixty-six. Anyway, to get back to Carlita—she was shipped here from Mexico City by my Grandpa Ryan."

Molly laughed. "I sense a story there."

"I never knew the crux of the matter, but it had something to do with a whim Grandma had, and a wager Grandpa made with the *Presidente* of Mexico."

"The president?" she echoed. "Your grandpa and grandma knew people in high places. Ah, the plot thickens."

Matt laughed.

Molly liked his laugh. It was real. "Do you suppose their bond accounts for the adobe architecture on your ranch?"

"A romantic thought, but no. The flavor of old Mexico remains because Mexicans and mestizos settled this region."

Molly was beginning to see the ranch through Matt's eyes. Conversation about livestock, cowboys, and the land flowed with ease.

"See that rock formation in the distance?"

She nodded. Two huge boulders twisted into each other as if in a lovers' embrace.

"A story passes among my men that an outlaw kidnapped a Mexican princess. During her captivity, in the heated days and long passionate nights, she fell in love with him. When her rescuers came, she twined herself around the outlaw to protect him. A single bullet meant for the outlaw passed through both of them. They took their dying breaths clinging to one another. The men in the posse tried to separate them. But the couple had turned to stone in an embrace to last for all eternity."

Molly felt an odd parallel between the legendary couple and herself. She had felt like a prisoner here in the beginning, but now, she was starting to feel like she could belong—and that scared her.



## Chapter Four

They were on a plateau now. Purple rocky hills reached high into the clouds, and below stood a grove of trees. Matt pointed at them. “Mesquite. Sometimes called honey locust.”

Molly heard the pride in his voice, as though he’d planted the trees himself. Pods drooped from the branches, and fallen husks encircled the base like prickly brown grass. It was becoming more and more apparent that Matt loved this land and every scraggly tree and bush on it.

“Have I been here before?” Nothing looked familiar.

He shook his head. “I’ve been meaning to bring you out this way for a long time.”

The strong emotion in his tone somehow carried and an undercurrent of evasion. Her gaze flew to his. The look they exchanged wasn’t what she expected. It was intense and humming with sexual tension. In self-preservation, she looked away.

A couple of big old pecan trees stood to their left. Their furrowed bark captured the shadows of the leafy branches. Molly thought they had more character and grace than the mesquite trees. But using them as a distraction didn’t work. Where would all this sizzling tension between her and Matt lead? If he was holding back information, did she want it to lead somewhere? Damn it, she shouldn’t.

Why did he have to ride so close? It made her too aware of the masterful rhythm of his body—too aware of her own desire.

Matt reined his stallion to the path that led down a slope and took the lead. Molly’s tension eased a bit, and she sighed, relieved to have a little distance between them.

The roar of an engine, growing louder as a plane approached, broke the silence. Molly looked up. Against the backdrop of the azure sky, a white, single-engine Cessna flew low and circled slowly.

Her neck prickled. “What’s that plane doing way out here?” She turned in the saddle to watch the Cessna circle one more time. Then it headed in the direction of the ranch house.

“Don’t recognize it. But ranchers often use light planes and helicopters to drop supplies, reach distant areas, and round up strays.”

While looking behind her at the plane, she slammed straight into a low-hanging branch. The force knocked her out of the saddle and onto her back, her head hitting the hard ground, stunning her.

Matt cursed and reined Gold King to a stop. He leaped off his horse and rushed to Molly’s side, lifting her with care and cradling her in his arms. “Are you all right, honey?”

Molly's head was spinning. She gave an embarrassed laugh. "A little bruised and battered, but I'll live." *Honey?*

He brushed a lock of hair from her eyes and kissed her temple. "I told you to watch those low branches."

His kiss and the husky tenderness in his voice touched her.

"I know. But I was looking at the plane." A metaphor for her life, she thought. She'd been so busy looking back that she was missing the *here and now*. They were supposed to be married, and they'd barely touched. Before she had time to reconsider her action, Molly slid her arms around Matt's neck and drew his face toward hers. He stiffened and held himself away. He stared at her for a long time. In his eyes, she saw desire struggling with control. To her acute disappointment and embarrassment, his damnable steel-like control won.

Well, she wasn't letting him get off that easily. "What is it you're trying so hard to keep from me?"

"For cryin' out loud, Molly, you just got knocked off a horse." He grabbed her chin. "Look at me." He checked her eyes, and then traced his hands over her neck. In spite of the heat and her exasperation, she felt a delicious little shiver.

Sliding his calloused hands over her arms, then her legs, he examined them thoroughly from ankle to thigh. Fire flamed within her; she gritted her teeth to hide her desire. He bent her legs, testing them for injuries. "Nothing seems broken," he said.

She frowned. She guessed hearts didn't count. She shook her head at her absurd thought. Her heart wasn't involved. It was more like a bruised ego.

"Do you think you can go on? Or should we head back?"

"I'm fine," she muttered. "I told you that."

He stood, bringing her up with him. He whistled for the horses, and they trotted to him. When Matt gripped Molly's hips to help her mount Starlight, another hot tremor shot through her. Why was her body so sensitive to his touch?

He swung into his own saddle. The brim of his Stetson shaded his eyes. "Look where you're going next time," he growled. "You scared the hell out of me."

"I'm overwhelmed by your sweet talk, cowboy." She smiled to herself. In a concerned moment, Matt had slipped up and called her honey.

She dug her heels into the horse's flanks. Starlight took off in a frightening gallop. *Oh, no. I just made another mistake.*

Molly bobbed wildly in the saddle, too scared to scream, and holding onto the saddle horn for dear life. It would serve her right if the ride ended up with her flat on her back again, perhaps this time with broken bones.

She heard Gold King's hooves pounding the trail behind her. When the horse came alongside, Matt grabbed the reins and slowed her down before she got into real trouble. "Fancy riding, Molly. But let's keep it simple. One fall is all my heart can take."

"What heart?" she said, trying to hide her profound relief and lingering fear. "Besides, I can be taken off guard once, but not twice." The tough tone she was seeking fizzled, but she had reached Matt on some level because he sent her a questioning look as though he suspected her words had a meaning beyond low branches—for instance, his rejection of her pass at him, and maybe more. An indefinable hurt deep inside told her there was something more complex going on here. Due to the damned amnesia, she wasn't sure exactly what.

"Don't push me too far, Molly. I do have a limit."

Now it was her turn to question if there might be a double meaning in his words. Was he inferring that if she made another advance he might lose control of his passion? Hmm. She'd like to think that—but maybe she was reading too much into his curt message. Or maybe not. Molly squared her shoulders and sat up straighter. Although Matt might not agree, she considered their brief duel of words a draw.

They rode on in silence, tension charging between them at an all-time high. Molly accepted the blame for the strain. It seemed she had a habit of making impulsive decisions that tended to get her in hot water. She'd have to watch that. She glanced at Matt out of the corner of her eye to see if he was still miffed. It was hard to tell. He was squinting, but his mouth was no longer flattened into a grim line.

She wrestled with herself over the next question and decided to ask it anyway. "You get angry a lot, don't you?"

He shook his head at her censure. "I wish you could remember how I was before the amnesia, before all the crap started piling up. Of late, my life's been what my foreman, Alfonso, likes to call *una lucia*—a battle—and if I don't fight back, none of us will survive."

His passionate words hummed through her. Whatever made Matt who he was, he believed his premise to the depth of his soul. "I haven't made it any easier on you, have I?"

"You went through a bad time, but we'll work it out."

When they rode into the shade of a cluster of oak trees, Molly heard the sweet refrain of a mockingbird. Matt reined his horse to a stop and gestured with a sweep of his arm to the tree-shaded green waters spilling over boulders in frothy mini-waterfalls. His expression was very intense, very sexy. "No matter what you think of me and my cowboy ways," he said, "or what you think of this hard, mean country with floods and droughts and tornadoes, you gotta love Verde Creek."

“I do,” she murmured. “It’s lovely here.” Then she laughed. “And you and this hard, mean nowhere-land also have a certain charm.”

He shook his head and broke into a grin. “That’s one of the things I love about you, Molly, your talent for coming up with something double-sided like put-down praise.” Matt reined Gold King in a circle to face her and sidled the horse close. He held out a hand. “Truce?” His voice was husky, his inflection challenging.

Eager to shake on it, she slid her hand into his. Matt’s firm grip and steady eye-contact drew her deeper into a curious complicated seduction. He played his come-hither, back-off game too well. What was behind the retreats? All the electric vibes charging the air around them told her he wanted her. Well, she could play the game, too, and would—just as soon as she learned the damn rules.

Matt pointed to a grassy clearing next to the creek. “I’m hungry. Let’s have our lunch here.”

When he dismounted, his thigh muscles tightened under his jeans. He came toward her, reaching out. Molly steeled herself against the anticipation of his touch. He grasped her waist in warm, strong hands and swung her to the ground. “Is this our land, too?” she asked, a little breathless.

He nodded, then tied their horses’ reins to a contorted oak branch. Matt snatched a rolled-up navy blue blanket from the back of his saddle. Molly wanted to help him spread it under the tree, but in light of their strong physical attraction, she hesitated, unsure about getting that close to him again. He placed the basket on the edge of the blanket and dropped to his knees. “Let’s see what Tita packed for us.”

Molly positioned herself at the farthest corner of the blanket. “It’ll be fantastic. We know that. Hand me the picnic basket. With Tita’s cooking and her flair for putting interesting things together, I’ll bet even I can spread a wicked banquet.” *Is that true? Do I have an eye for presentation?* She paused and looked up at Matt. “Am I right about that?”

A grin played at his lips. “Wicked as they come, Molly, wicked as they come.”

Their hands brushed when he handed her the basket. Molly gasped at the crack of static electricity. Matt’s eyes twinkled, but to his credit, he said nothing. With trembling hands, Molly set out the thermos, the bananas, oranges, and Mexican corn bread.

Matt took the cover off the meat. The smell of mesquite-grilled barbecued beef and onions wafted in the air. “Ah, *carne asada*. You’ll love this.”

And she did. The ride through the dry heat had made her thirsty and ravenous. Although her nerves were taut, it seemed the stress had increased her appetite rather than diminished it.

The shady surroundings by the creek were breathtaking, but rather than drink in nature and fill her thirsty soul, she studied Matt with brazen scrutiny. Something about him got to her on a deep, unrelenting level. Perhaps it was his dark, sexy magnetism or the mystery behind their life together. All she knew was he kept her off balance, and somehow kept alive this

wild, electrifying tension between them. If she wanted to keep her heart intact, and keep her resolve to remain aloof until she knew more about their relationship, she had to fight the spell this man was weaving over her.

She watched the breeze ripple the meandering silvery-green creek. The restful sound of its waters soothed her inner turmoil and brought her racing heart back to normal speed. She tucked the last bite of grilled beef into her mouth and shoved her plate aside. Letting her feelings run amuck wouldn't get her the answers she needed. Matt always closed her off when she asked questions about herself, but what if she used the the key to understanding him—his family—to indirectly target this intriguing cowboy? She thought of his earlier anger. "Luke's part of what makes you angry, too, isn't he?"

When Matt's head came up with a jerk, Molly immediately wanted to take back her words. Several heartbeats of silence passed. She was about to apologize for pushing the point about Matt's anger when he spoke.

"Yeah. Luke's an unbroken stallion," Matt drawled. "Wild as they come."

With the door open, she delved deeper. "I got the impression he's quite the ladies' man and a two-fisted drinker."

"Can't deny it." Matt looked down. "The drinking part has always rubbed me wrong, like a burr under the saddle. "Luke always chooses the messy route. He has a good heart, but he's the kind of maverick who drifts through life with no apparent goals, falling into barroom brawls and inappropriate relationships. Reckless. Imprudent. He believes life is a crap shoot where you risk all or nothing."

"And you're the opposite?"

\* \* \* \*

Matt frowned. Molly probably meant it as a statement, but Matt took it as a question. "I guess sometimes I want to be. Other times, I envy him." Matt knew that much of his intensity resulted from the constant suppression of his own reckless impulses.

Molly leaned forward, looking full of devilry. "Memory-wise, my life started when we arrived here. To me, we just met. But in spite of that short-term relationship, may I tell you my impression of you?"

He laughed, feeling his walls start to rise. "I'm not sure I can take your blunt assessment."

"I'll go easy on you." With mischief glinting in her eyes, she tilted her head and studied him. "Let's see . . . you're cautious, hard working. A you-can-count-on-me kind of guy. But you're also a control freak with hidden secrets that make you miserable."

Matt tried to laugh, but it came out a snort. Molly had hit it right on. He feared his reckless side, hated when his inner wildness spilled out. To fight his secret demons, he buried his emotions under layers of rigid, relentless control. Until Molly had come to the ranch, he'd

been as miserable as hell, figuring that if he kept his life compact and manageable, he'd have less to lose.

He moved closer to Molly, with only a vague awareness he'd done so. He didn't want to talk about himself; he wanted to talk about her. "It's been three days since you left the hospital. Any memory flashes? Dreams?"

"Nothing." Her soft response and unwillingness to meet his eye contact suggested otherwise.

"Don't hold out on me," he prodded. "This is crucial. Everything will be better when you remember." He hoped it was true, but he had mixed feelings. He wanted her to remember the nights they spent entwined in one another's arms, but feared her memory of their parting. He'd done what had to be done—ended their affair. It had been abrupt, cold, but leaving her had ripped his guts and heart out.

"Give me some hints," she said. "My memory needs something to jog it."

"I told you, the doctor advised against pushing things—"

"Well, maybe ol' Doc De La Fuente's a quack. Perhaps I know what's best for me. And I say I'll get in less trouble if I know what's going on."

Matt's stomach knotted. "What do you mean, less trouble?"

She shrugged. "Poor choice of words."

He doubted that. A woman who had made her living choosing and writing exacting words didn't often pick wrong ones. But what trouble could she have gotten into? He had kept the phones and newspapers from her. Newspapers. Maybe he could give her a subtle hint without throwing her into shock. "You've been out of touch for a while. Would you like to see a newspaper?"

Her eyes lit up like a kid's at Christmas, and the sight of her happiness warmed his heart. "I'd love it."

"I'll get one for you when we get back to the ranch."

She toyed with a blade of grass. "A Dallas paper?"

*Dallas?* Surprise shot through him. Was she beginning to remember? A San Antonio paper would have been a more likely guess. "Why jump to that conclusion?"

She shrugged. "Is it important? Do I have some mysterious tie to Dallas?"

"We went to the Cotton Bowl together, and the Dallas State Fair. I don't recall anything else." The lie turned to acid in his mouth. "What's important are your memories. Promise me you'll tell me at the first sign of one."

He hated holding back. It could ruin any chance for him to have her again. In his fantasy, he'd take her in his arms and kiss her breathless. She would respond to his lips after remembering the reality of their past lovemaking, remembering the low murmurs between them and their hard, hot climaxes. Most vital, she'd remember that they loved each other, and agree that they belonged together, this time forever.

Suddenly, Molly got this I'm-up-to-something expression and edged across the blanket toward him until their hips touched. When their bodies touched, the heat practically set fire to the denim between them and seared his skin beneath the fabric.

"You say we're married . . . right?"

Her words and the incessant hot wind electrified Matt's nerve-endings, making him edgy. The air itself seemed alive, dangerous. "So?"

"Are we in love?"

Matt stuck a finger into his collar to loosen it. His throat went dry. "I love you, and you . . . you used to love me."

Molly moistened her lips. "Then why haven't you kissed me?"

"Kiss you?" He cringed at the huskiness in his voice and felt his control shredding.

She reached up and traced his jawline. "Yes. Even if it's against doctor's orders." She grinned. "Especially if it's against doctor's orders."

He hesitated, then laughed and swept her hat off her head. It sailed to the edge of the blanket, followed by his Stetson, which landed on top of hers in a soft stack. "You're such an imp," he said. "And I love you for it."

Matt gathered Molly in his arms. *Damn, I shouldn't do this, at least not until she remembers.* It was risky and unfair, but he was propelled forward by the strength of what they'd once been to each other, an indefinable something more powerful than basic need.

When he stroked her hair and looked into her eyes, she entwined her arms around his neck and drew him closer. He caught her fragrance—the scent of wild strawberries stirred by a hot afternoon breeze. The muscles at the back of his neck tightened. He felt her heat flowing into him, and he knew the hunger he felt was in her, too. He stared at her lips. They parted slightly in the special sexy way he knew so well. She lifted her head, offering what he desperately wanted.

He didn't move.

She glared at him like she wanted to shake him. Or maybe it was anger at herself for her desire. "Well, are you going to kiss me or not?"

Frozen with rigid control, Matt didn't move a muscle. *Oh, God.* He groaned as his control broke. He bent and captured her lips.

Molly drew back enough to whisper, "This is somehow familiar, like coming home." Tears glinted in her eyes.

Taking his time, Matt traced her lower lip with his tongue, in hope of driving her mad and sending some familiar sensations slithering through her.

She moaned, and he covered her mouth again. He could taste the tangy barbecue flavor of her mouth.

He tensed and put all he had into the kiss to make it hard, hot.

She clung to him with a ferocity that fired his passion. He caressed her back, hoping to steal her sanity and catapult her into a familiar world of warm, delicious madness.

*God, this is so against doctor's orders.* He tried to pull back, but her mouth followed.

"Don't stop, please," she whispered.

A hard, steady, brain-shaking pulse throbbed in his temple. His loins burned. He damned himself for his lust—and Molly for bringing it out in him. He took a deep shuddering breath and, kissing Molly's eyelids, tried to cool down. His next move could well prove him a heel or the responsible man he'd always tried to be. He damned himself and Molly as all control broke free.

Matt kissed Molly again with all the love he felt for her, then untangled her arms from his neck. "Honey, you won't be a consenting partner until you remember." He wondered if she heard the ragged edge to his voice.

"I don't understand. We're married, aren't we?" The tremor in her voice tore at him, but he had to be strong for both of them. "See? That's what I mean. You don't know me. And it hurts like hell." *At least that part was true.*

Molly glared at him. "What if I never remember?"

It was just like her—direct, challenging. He gave her a quick, fierce hug and wished she could remember him the way he remembered her. "We'd better get back to the ranch before I change my mind."

"From what I've seen so far, that's not likely," Molly muttered as she began to help repack the basket, careful to keep her fingers from touching his.

He stood and extended a hand to her. Molly ignored his offer as though she couldn't let him touch her—as though her emotions, like his, were raging out of control. She rose under her own power, and his stomach knotted when she stepped away from him. On impulse, he bent and picked an Indian paintbrush. In a slow, deliberate pace, he walked toward her and



tucked the vibrant red flower behind her ear. He winked. “Just so you won’t doubt that I love you.”

\* \* \* \*

When Matt and Molly arrived back at the ranch house, the place looked deserted. No music playing, no aromas of food. *This doesn’t feel right*, Molly thought. With a rising panic, she swung herself down from Starlight and ran toward the house.

“Molly! What the hell—”

“Sara Jane!” she called back at him while racing up the steps. The door was locked. She banged on it with her fist. No sounds inside. “Hurry, Matt!”

Matt hitched the reins of their horses to a post, then came running. “What’s wrong?”

“Get this door open!”

He opened it, and Molly raced inside calling Tita’s name.

“Wait, Molly,” Matt shouted.

She ignored him, and checked the nursery. *The crib was empty.*

She felt Matt grab her waist from behind. He turned her around to face him. “It’s all right, Molly,” he crooned. “We got back a little late. Tita’s probably taken Sara Jane home with her.”

Tears pushed at Molly’s eyes. She thought about the surreptitious telephone call she’d made. A shiver coursed down her spine. “I need to be sure.”

Matt gave her waist an encouraging squeeze. “I have a cell phone in my saddlebag. I’ll call Tita.”

\* \* \* \*

Matt raced to Gold King, not because he was worried but to ease Molly’s mind. He retrieved his cellular phone. Molly was pale and trembling. Damn. She didn’t need this stress. He should have considered how finding the baby gone would affect her and avoided it. He got Tita on the line and held the phone so Molly could listen. Tita assured them that Sara Jane was with her and happy as a lark, just like Matt knew she would be. Hearing the baby was safe wasn’t enough. Molly insisted upon going to get her at once. Matt told one of the ranch hands to see to the horses, and then he drove Molly to Tita’s house in his truck.

Tita was out on the porch in a worn rocker feeding Sara Jane a bottle when they arrived. Practicing his opening song for the Rancher’s Rodeo, Roberto sat on the railing strumming “Texas, Our Texas” while staying close by the baby as instructed.

Molly ran to Tita and grabbed up Sara Jane. Tita stiffened. "What's wrong, Molly?"

"Nothing." She blushed, but she held the baby close like she'd never let her go. Sara Jane's eyes widened, round and blue. "Thanks for taking care of my baby." Molly kissed the baby's rosy cheeks and tickled her, her eyes never leaving the cherub face. She eased the bottle to Sara Jane's lips so the baby could resume sucking. "Finding you gone—" Molly's voice broke, and she couldn't finish.

Sensing that no matter how much he longed to, now wasn't the time to go to her, Matt clenched his teeth and rooted himself to the spot. His frown deepened when he spotted his older brother, Parker, coming around the side of Tita's house with two strangers. One was a Latino with fine features who walked with the grace of a bullfighter. The other guy had a potato-nose and lumbered on the tree-trunk-like legs of a muscle-bound wrestler. An unlikely trio, Matt thought. He could see by his brother's glassy eyes that he'd been drinking as usual. The seven years Parker had on Matt hadn't made him any wiser.

"Why aren't you out rounding up steers with Luke?" Matt growled.

Parker rubbed his bristly day-old beard. "Emergency came up."

Molly seemed to be sizing up Parker, maybe noticing how much taller he was. Six feet six inches of lean mulishness. Matt knew that although he and his brother Parker looked a lot alike, drinking had given Parker a rougher look that, oddly enough, probably appealed to some women. Matt felt confident that Molly wasn't one of them. Despite her innate aversion to his steely self-control, she would probably prefer it to the reckless ways of his two brothers.

"Why didn't you use your field phone?" Matt asked.

"Tried but your house phone was off and your cell must've been outta range. 'Sides, my new sidekicks here decided they wanted to talk to you face-to-face."

His brother's slurred words brought such anger that Matt felt the tendon knot in his neck. Fighting to stay calm, he held up his hand to interrupt. "Hold up, Parker. I want you to meet someone." He drew Molly and the baby forward and rested his arm on Molly's shoulder. "Parker, this is my wife, Molly."

"Whoa! Wife, you say?" Parker looked her up and down, then smiled his winning grin, showing his gold tooth. "Howdy, ma'am, welcome to the Bar R. Been wonderin' who Sara Jane's mama was. Seems my li'l brother is just full of surprises and secrets."

Matt tensed for more wisecracks about the sudden appearance of first a baby and now a wife. Instead, Parker turned to the men standing next to him. Both reeked of wine.

"Since we're meetin' people," Parker drawled, apparently more interested in introducing his latest drinking buddies than pursuing the subject of his brother showing up with a wife, "these're my newfound sidekicks, Paulo Santana and Webb Viceman. They had plane trouble, and their radio went out. I called for help. But Webb wanted to talk to you."

The strangers stared at Molly. She shifted the baby to her other side, looking wary, uncomfortable.

Matt made eye contact with Tita and gestured with his head. Understanding his silent message to get Molly and the baby out of harm's way, Tita motioned to Molly, and the women slipped into the house.

"That must have been the single-engine Cessna I saw earlier," Matt said, drawing their attention back to him. "Which one of you is the pilot?" At the Latino's affirmation, he scrutinized the pilot and his Caucasian passenger with suspicion. "What was your destination?"

The Latino pilot's eye twitched. "Your ranch, Señor."

Webb nodded in agreement and thrust a brawny hand at Matt. It was sweaty and too smooth. "Heard you were hiring," he said in an affable tone. "Paulo flew me down to look over your spread."

Webb didn't look like any ranch hand Matt had ever met. "My men usually come in by horse or truck. Planes are a little rich for hired hands."

"I ain't got a truck or a horse," Webb replied with a little laugh and a shake of his head. "Paulo here owed me a favor, and I needed to get out of Mexico fast."

Matt met Webb's evasive look straight on. "Problems with the law?"

"Girlfriend's old man. A big-shot diplomat in Mexico who thinks a cowpoke ain't good enough for his little princess."

"You're not from Mexico?" Nothing about this guy rang true.

"Nah. Texas."

Matt frowned. All Texans claimed two hometowns—the one they live in and San Antonio, the home of the Alamo and the heart and soul of Texas. This guy wasn't claiming any particular place, and it just didn't wash. Rarely did Texans say merely, "I'm from Texas." With their zealous regionalism, the simple statement didn't say enough. "That's a lot of territory," Matt said. "Wanna pin it down?"

"I'm a wanderer," he replied a little too smoothly. "But mostly South Texas."

South Texas included San Antonio and embraced the border area, and this guy's accent didn't fit. "Sorry about your scrape with your girlfriend's father, but we aren't hiring right now."

Parker shifted into a wide stance and folded his arms. "Sure we are. Shoot, I already hired Webb. He knows his cattle, and I could use the help. Luke's not worth spit."

Matt frowned. “Luke does fine when you guys stay sober.” Parker had no authority to hire anyone, and he knew it. But Matt decided against jumping him in front of strangers.

“Señor,” the pilot said, “even if you do not hire Webb, we cannot leave until the mechanic comes in the morning. May we impose on your Texas hospitality for the night?”

Matt’s stomach knotted. “Of course.” Like it or not, with the ranch located miles from anywhere, he couldn’t send them away without a meal and a night’s rest. He turned to his brother. “Get your drinking buddies some grub and settle them in the bunkhouse. Then come up to the house alone. And we’ll talk.”

No matter what Parker wanted, Matt wasn’t about to hire a stranger without checking him out. Not with Molly’s and Sara Jane’s lives on the line.

## Chapter Five

Matt's and Parker's raised voices from downstairs could easily be heard upstairs. Molly slammed down her hairbrush. If this didn't stop, they were going to wake Sara Jane with shouts that grew angrier and louder by the minute. Barefoot and dressed in a nightgown and cotton robe, Molly raced downstairs to calm the men before they came to blows. One of the double doors of the study stood open. Molly pressed herself against it.

From inside, Parker's words cut the air like a razor. "You always gotta play big boss and throw your weight around."

"This isn't about ego," Matt's said.

"The hell it ain't! Dang your hide, Matt. I hired Webb, and he stays hired."

"No." The indisputable finality in Matt's single word echoed around the high ceiling of the entryway.

Molly shivered. Whatever made her think she could calm these two bullheaded men? She'd better stay out of it. But she couldn't leave. This was her chance to learn more about the complex man she was married to.

"Webb knows cattle, and we need a new hand," Parker shouted. "There's no cussed reason not to hire him, 'cept your damned pumped-up ego."

"Like it or not, I do the hiring."

He was talking lower now, and Molly strained to catch his words.

"I can't have strangers here."

"Why the hell not? We've hired total strangers before. Turned out to be good workers, too. So why the sudden change?"

Matt remained silent.

"You're my brother, Matt," Parker said. "Damn it, remember when we used to tell each other anything? If you'd just trust me once in a while . . ."

Molly wanted to scream, *Don't trust him, Matt.*

She heard the thud of boots pacing. "You'll keep it to yourself?" Matt asked.

Molly's heart ached for the hope she heard in that low rumble of shaky faith.

"Never been one to blab," Parker drawled.

Matt let out a gush of air. "Okay. Some men are after Molly and her baby."

Molly froze. Her knees went all liquidy. *Her baby was in danger, and Matt hadn't told her!* Sheer will and the need to hear more kept her from racing inside and confronting him.

"Who's this Molly, anyway?" Parker's slurred words dripped with venom. "She sure as spit ain't your wife."

Seconds ticked by. Why didn't Matt tell his brother he was wrong? Waiting for Matt to deny Parker's words was like seeing lightning on the horizon and listening for the thunder to boom. A small piece of Molly's heart crumbled when she realized his denial would never come.

"Why are you puttin' her before your own brother?" Parker asked. "You forgettin' that blood's thicker than water, little brother?" He stressed the word little, charging it with some sort of wounded significance.

Too much was going on beneath the surface for Molly to keep up. It was clear the clash of wills between the men wasn't just about hiring a man. This dispute went far deeper than that. But she had her own turmoil. If Matt wasn't the baby's father who was? Was she married, or an unwed mother?

"Molly and her baby are in danger. You're not," Matt growled. "And I won't risk their lives just to give you a new drinking buddy." He paused. "You'd better keep your word. And go along with this without a fuss."

Parker snickered. "Why should I? You've got everything, and I've got spit."

"Damn it! Think of the baby."

Bile rose in Molly's throat—her baby was in danger. Fear clutched at her soul, but she had to hear it all.

"Think of my kids," Parker said, "and the wife I lost because you robbed me of my inheritance."

"Bev didn't leave over the ranch. She left because you haven't drawn a sober breath in five years, and you fool around with every little chippy you meet."

"That's my business. No snot-nosed, wet-behind-the-ears brother is gonna tell me how to live my life. Webb stays hired. If that's a problem for the woman, get rid of her!"

Parker pivoted and dashed past Molly as though she were invisible. His boots pounded the ceramic tile floors with unmistakable fury.

She waited until the front door slammed with finality to step into the room. "How could you not tell me my baby is in danger?" Her voice cracked with pent-up tension.

“Molly!” Matt’s black brows arched, and the angry red color in his face drained to a stunned white. She fought an urge to slap him. He gripped the edge of his desk. “Sara Jane’s not in danger. I’d never let anything happen to her. I love her like my own.”

“Like your own!” The sincerity she’d heard in his tone didn’t ease the pain. She glared at him, her defiant green eyes clashing with his alarmed brown ones. “But she’s not yours, is she? And I’m not your wife.” The intriguing cowboy she’d begun to know and care for had disappeared, and this liar before her was more of a stranger than ever.

“Damn it, Molly, don’t push this.” He crossed the room, looking masculine to the core, and drew her into his arms, trapping her in their strength, their heat. A thick lock of raven-black hair tumbled across his forehead.

She put her hands against his chest. “I am pushing it. All the way.” She poked his sternum, punctuating her words. “And I don’t want to hear any more mumbo-jumbo about doctor’s orders.” Her voice shook, but she didn’t care. “I want to know everything. Now!”

“Damn Parker’s big mouth.”

Molly struggled against Matt’s hold of steel. “This isn’t your brother’s fault. He’s right. Your ego is as big as Texas. You want to control everything. Well, you’re not controlling me, Matt Ryan. And the fact that you tried to control me might be the very reason why those men are here.”

Matt’s jaw muscle twitched. His eyes narrowed. “What do you mean, Molly?”

“No. You first. Enough lies. Tell me what’s going on, and it better be the truth.”

A trace of indecision darkened Matt’s eyes. “We could both regret this.” His hard-edged tone warned her that they were nearing a dangerous impasse.

In spite of her dread, she lifted her chin and said, “I’ll chance it. I have to know, Matt..”

He shifted his weight on scuffed black sealskin boots. “If we have to get into this, let’s take it to the kitchen.”

“Fine.” She whirled and took off ahead of him. He overtook her and flipped on the light. She squinted at the brightness. Shiny copper pans dangled on hooks near the stove. The air smelled of basil and jalapeño peppers. She paced while Matt stuck two cups of instant coffee in the microwave.

“Sit down,” Matt ordered. “You make me nervous.”

She scowled at him and continued to pace.

Matt slid steaming cups of coffee onto the table and sat down behind one.

Molly stopped pacing and tapped her foot. “I’m waiting.”

Matt took a gulp of coffee as if to brace himself. “A Dallas crime boss is after you because you’re the witness who can lock him up. Forever.”

Her knees went weak. “Crime boss?” Molly echoed, and plunked into a straight-backed chair behind her coffee. Oh no. Her stupid call to Dallas may have led him right to them. She darted a look toward the nursery.

As though Matt knew what she was thinking, he said, “I stationed an armed man outside Sara Jane’s window. One of the vaqueros. No one will get by him. Ramon has eyes like a fox and can shoot the fleas off a dog.”

“Flea powder is a better way to go,” she said, trying to play it tough and hide her fear.

“Glad to see you haven’t lost your sense of humor.”

But she had. Nothing was funny anymore. “Since you’re not my husband, who is?”

“You’re not married.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive. I checked all the places you used to live, and for good measure all the states and Mexico.”

“Then I’m—” She paused and moistened her dry throat. “An unwed mother?” It was getting worse every minute. How would she find mental peace with herself with that lurking in her past? Her teary eyes searched his face. “Who is Sara Jane’s father?”

“It’s not in the file. Headquarters suspected it was a detective you slipped off to see several times. The men guarding you knew his name, but it didn’t get into the system.”

God, she didn’t expect to be a blushing virgin, but slipping off to see some nameless man didn’t feel like something she would do under the circumstances. When Matt finished giving her more details—including her real identity—she asked, “Katrina Molette Radlavich. What kind of name is that?” She’d grown rather fond of hearing Matt call her Molly.

“Maybe Polish, maybe Russian. You went by Katrina, but I called you Kat. You went through several names in the federal witness security program. Margaret Jones, Sally Smith. I switched to calling you Molly after the amnesia.”

Aghast, she stared at him. “About this amnesia . . . it’s temporary, right?”

“That’s what the doctor says.”

“And when I start remembering things, I’m going to remember that I was in a Witness Protection Program because a dangerous man wants me dead before I can testify against him, right?”



“Yes. You were—are—a reporter. You just got too close, and became a threat.”

“So who the hell are you?”

He swallowed, and she saw his throat muscles ripple. “I’m a federal agent assigned to keep you safe.”

Molly gripped her coffee cup tighter with both hands. “So we’re not married. So everything you told me about the way we met was a lie—the sensational green dress and all that?”

“The dress part was true.” His voice deepened. “You looked great in it.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.” She felt an urge to slap him. “What were we doing at the party? It wasn’t just social, was it?”

“We were both after the same lead. You to get your story for the *Dallas Morning News*, and me to put the crime boss behind bars.”

“And we failed?”

“We succeeded in getting the lead. But it didn’t go quite like we hoped.”

“You’re the king of understatement, aren’t you?”

He stared at her with masked eyes. “Del Fuego is a powerful man. He’s dangerous and will stop at nothing. He believes he can buy or terrorize his way out of anything. While you were in the Witness Protection Program, your guards were killed and Sara Jane was kidnapped. I guess he figured you’d think twice about testifying if your child’s life was on the line.”

Her heart hammered against her ribs. Her beautiful, innocent little Sara Jane was upstairs asleep in the crib. “Who rescued my baby?”

He looked down at his big, work-worn hands. “I did.”

Sincere gratitude rushed through Molly and eased her anger a fraction. “Thank you.” She had trouble getting the words past the lump in her throat; they were so inadequate for the danger he must have faced. “How?”

“The details are unimportant.” His tight words suggested that the opposite was true. Something about the rescue had cost him a great deal, and he didn’t want to talk about it. Wouldn’t talk about it.

“You said I was a reporter.”

He nodded. “The best. But too damned daring for your own good.”

She could believe she was a reporter. She liked writing things down, liked looking for answers. Traces of memories flitted across her mind, fragmented images . . . Oh God, she'd seen a man killed! How could she have forgotten that? She clenched her hands into fists.

Matt took her hand and uncoiled it. She hated that his comforting touch was exactly what she needed, yearned for.

"When all this comes rushing back, it could be tough."

She knew what was at stake. "I . . . I can handle it."

"To heal, you'll have to deal with what happened. And I'm here to help." He paused and examined her face. "I've told you everything. Now it's your turn. What did you do?"

Matt hadn't mentioned anything about the coins she'd found in the toe of her slipper. Maybe they had nothing to do with all this. Or maybe he was still withholding information from her. She wanted to trust him, but . . .

"I found a phone number in my suitcase and called it."

"Damn it, Molly. I knew it! That's what you were doing in the barn this morning."

Her face heated. "I hoped the voice on the other end of the line would trigger my memory. Instead, I think maybe the guy recognized mine."

Matt opened and closed his fists, obviously fighting to rein in his anger. "Why did you chance that? Ever hear of caller ID and tracing devices?"

"It's your fault. You kept things from me. I couldn't stand not knowing who I was or what was going on."

"And now that you know?" Warning rode his words.

She ignored it. "Do I have family? Maybe I could stay with them."

"You have a mom and a sister, but you'd put everyone in danger if you saw them."

"What about my dad?"

"A journalist, like you."

An image flashed in Molly's mind—a little redheaded girl and a woman with frizzy flame-red hair. Was the woman her mother? They were in a room with a chalkboard and desks. "You're going to be a writer, like your dad," the woman had said, handing her a sheaf of papers. Then, it hit Molly. The woman was her third-grade teacher, Mrs. Knight. Molly tried to bring forward an image of her father's face. Nothing. "I want to see my dad. He'll help me."

“I’m sorry, Molly. He died five years ago. Cancer.”

“No!” Shock rolled over her like a giant wave. Tears pushed at the back of her eyes. Her dad died of a horrible disease, and she didn’t even remember? She took a deep breath to calm herself. For Sara Jane’s sake, she couldn’t lose control.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. He was watching her. “You remembered something a moment ago, didn’t you?”

“Nothing that would help.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

She curled her fingers and dug her nails into her palms. “I remembered a teacher’s name, that’s all.” She paused and looked straight at him. “So, what’s your verdict, Judge Ryan? Helpful? Yes? No?”

His jaw muscle twitched again. “It’s a beginning.”

“I want to leave, Matt, and take Sara Jane some place safe. You have to help me.”

“My job is to keep you both safe. And right now this is the safest place I can think of.”

“Safe? Or just convenient for you? You can run your blasted ranch with a witness protection gig on the side!” When he didn’t deny it, Molly figured she’d hit close to the truth. “What about those men that showed up in the plane?”

“Good as gone.”

“And the others who might follow? Those dead agents thought they could protect my baby, too. But they couldn’t even protect themselves.” She slicked her damp palms down the lap of her robe.

He watched her as though measuring her fear. “We’re isolated here. No one can come within miles of us without being seen. And I have guns and an army of men—”

“Your brother brought the Trojan Horse right into the camp.”

“That won’t happen again.” His words rumbled out in a soft drawl.

“Won’t it? You play your control game with everyone else, but I don’t think you have any control over your brothers. The sooner you admit it, the sooner they just might take responsibility for their own actions.”

Matt’s eyes darkened, but his voice remained low and composed, like the calm before a storm. “This isn’t about my brothers, Molly.”

She'd hit him where it hurt, and although an instant later she regretted it, she was too angry to admit it. "No, it's about my baby and me. And I say we go."

Matt jerked out of the chair and began to pace, moving with the predatory edginess of a coyote. "Running without a plan is like calling a number with no idea who you're calling."

Molly winced. She folded her arms, fighting tremors. "I'm not staying here like a sitting duck."

"Give me until morning to handle things here."

His tone was firm, but she sensed his resolve was weakening. "I want us to decide everything together from now on," she said. "I won't be some pawn that you and the FBI move around at will."

Matt muttered something unintelligible. With his back to her, he braced himself on his muscular arms on the kitchen counter. He rolled his head around as if to loosen the tight tendons, flexed his wide shoulders, and leaned forward over the sink to stare out the window. What did he see out there in the darkness?

After an eternity of silence, he turned and said, "Here's the deal. Tell me all your memories, and I'll run things by you before I act on them."

"Why are you so hung up on my memories? With the mess we're in now, they're not important."

"Wrong. They're important to a lot of people, Molly." He held her gaze. "You're the only one who can testify against a man who has destroyed many lives and who, if he goes free, will destroy even more."

"That's the FBI agent talking now. Did you make love to me just to get me to testify?"

Her stomach knotted at the thought. She felt this powerful attraction between them, and he'd said he loved her. But how could she trust anything he said now?

He flinched as if she'd slapped him. "How could you ask that?"

"Because, damn it, I don't remember any of it." Although her voice broke, she swallowed and kept going. "This is my past we're talking about, my life, and from now on, I'm asking all the hard questions. And you'd better answer them."

He stared at her for a moment, then folded his arms. "Ask away."

She frowned at his closed posture but refused to let it stop her. "Do you and I . . . do we . . . I mean, have we ever . . ."

"Been in love?" he supplied with a calm that amazed her.

She swallowed past the lump in her throat and nodded.

“Yes,” he said, looking cornered.

“What happened?” Her question came out small and quiet, and she was almost afraid of the answer.

He shrugged. “We broke up.”

“Why?”

“I couldn’t go into the Witness Protection Program with you.”

“Why not?”

He shifted his weight. “Your safety, my job.”

Her heartbeat quickened. “Such control. You just walked away without a backward glance.”

He pushed away from the counter, kneeled in front of her, and tried to take her hands. She moved them out of his reach. “It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” he said. His husky rumble was full of regret.

She closed her eyes against a jagged stab of pain, and then looked at him head-on. “But you did it, damn it.” In spite of her anger and breaking heart, Molly kept her words soft. “Why this wife fantasy story?”

“To protect you and Sara Jane. An extra woman and baby on the ranch wouldn’t be noticed if they were my wife and child. And I needed you to buy it.”

“I see. You thought it would be easier to control a wife than a jilted ex-girlfriend.”

“Hey, I’m on your side.”

“You have a crummy way of showing it,” she snapped, fighting numbing hurt and resentment.

“Work with me, Molly. I’ve messed things up royally, but you haven’t exactly helped the situation.”

“What did you expect? I lost my memory, not my mind.”

“Having amnesia puts you at a dangerous disadvantage. You have to trust me. When Del Fuego is behind bars and this is all over, you can walk away. If that’s what you want.”

That was part of the problem. She didn’t want to walk away. For a little while by the creek when he’d kissed her, she’d begun to dream of a life together. But this man had lied to her. “I won’t stay here.”

He captured her hands in an inescapable grip. Tension sparked by her anger and his frustration charged between them, then ignited into something else, something indefinable, unnerving. She trembled at its power.

Matt cleared his throat. "You can't go gallivanting all over the countryside with Sara Jane without knowing where you're going." He paused. "But I have an idea. We'll pack up and leave at sunrise."

"Our destination?"

"Buck George's place. He'll put us up. The Rancher's Rodeo is held on his spread. Roberto's competing in a few days, and I want to be there anyway to cheer him on."

Without a better idea of her own, she had to be satisfied with his, but she wouldn't feel safe until she was away from here—away from those two men—and away from her own traitorous emotions.

\* \* \* \*

Matt called Tita and told her the new plans. She volunteered to come over and help Molly get a few things together. With preparations for the trip set in motion, Matt headed for the bunkhouse. He had more questions for the two uninvited guests. In the distant blackness he heard a coyote's lonely howl. Wind kicked up dust and earthy livestock smells. His ranch, surrounded by flat, brush country, stretched beneath an endless star-studded sky. John Steinbeck's words about Texas played at the edges of Matt's mind—something about Texas being more than a state of mind, and more like a mystique closely approximating a religion, or something like that. But it was how Matt felt about the state, and, thanks to Molly, he'd learned he felt the same way about his land. He'd like to mount Gold King and ride the range to clear his head and drink in the peace and nighttime quiet of his vast land, but with so much left to do to meet the early-morning takeoff, he needed to stick to business.

Matt kicked a stone out of his way. If he'd leveled with Molly she would never have made that call. He hoped the doctor was wrong, and Molly wouldn't have a setback from eavesdropping on him and his brother. Damn Parker. Parker had brought things to a head all right. And Molly had heard it all. She'd looked so beautiful in her nightgown and robe, her hair all tousled, and her green eyes full of fire and determination. He swore under his breath when his body hardened from pent-up desire, somehow made more potent by the hot night breeze and the wild strum of guitars coming from the bunkhouse.

Parker, holding a quart of beer, staggered out the bunkhouse door. "Well, I hope you're happy. You made my friends feel so unwelcome they hightailed it outta here. Pronto."

The cord in the back of Matt's neck tightened. "What do you mean?"

"They're gone."

"What?"

“You deaf? Gone. Just gone.”

Matt checked the bunkhouse for himself. Webb and Paulo were gone, all right. Matt called Luke and learned that the men had returned to the plane and had taken off a little over an hour ago. He should’ve been glad they were out of his hair, but he found it oddly suspicious that a disabled plane was suddenly airworthy and that men who had insisted upon staying the night abruptly left without a word.

\* \* \* \*

A nearby huizache branch scratched against the windowpane in the nursery. Molly jerked at the sound, eyes wide. She rubbed the goose bumps that prickled along her arms. Were those men here to harm her baby? With trembling hands, she stuffed diapers and baby clothes into a large bag. At another sound behind her, Molly jumped and whirled around.

“Buenos noches, Señorita,” Tita said.

Molly winced—she’d obviously lost the Señora status. “Good evening, Tita. I guess Matt told you I discovered we aren’t married.”

Tita nodded. “I told him he was playing with fire. But that Doctor De La Fuente alarmed him, told him your mind was fragile. Señor Matt’s heart is in the right place, but he’s a mere man.” She laughed and shrugged. “And what do men know about the workings of a woman’s mind? Or her heart?”

Molly smiled in spite of herself. Tita had a way of cutting to the point.

Tita glanced down at Sara Jane who was cooing and kicking her feet as if in time to the music coming from the slow-whirling animal mobile. “I’m here to help,” Tita said, handing Molly a slip of paper. “I made a list.”

Molly glanced at it. “This’ll help a lot. Thanks. I couldn’t seem to get my brain in gear and was afraid I’d forget something important.”

“You wouldn’t. But two minds are better than one.”

Molly gave a shaky laugh. “Especially when one’s had an emotional blackout.”

Tita placed the car seat by the door and stacked it with extra diapers and blankets. “Señor Matt says you are starting to remember things. That is good, yes?”

Molly shoved some sterilized bottles into a padded tote and ignored the question, unable to think of anything but the danger lurking around her baby. “Matt said he rescued Sara Jane.” Thinking about her baby in the clutches of those monsters made her break out in a cold sweat.

“The rescue cost Señor Matt more than he will ever admit,” Tita said, opening a drawer. “To save Sara Jane, he had to kill the men guarding her. He’d never killed before, and the horror of it weighs heavily on his mind. But for the baby, he would do it again. He’d give his own life; he loves her so.”

Molly’s throat tightened. Matt may have gone about things all wrong, but he’d saved her baby—and from what she was told, at great danger and emotional cost to himself. For that, she’d be forever grateful.

When Molly and Tita had everything packed, Tita left and Molly fed Sara Jane before going to bed. Molly knew she needed to get some sleep if they were to get an early start in the morning. But sleep was elusive. Her mind began to churn and bits of memory zoomed around her like sky rockets at a Fourth of July celebration, soaring so fast she couldn’t latch on to any of them for long. She wasn’t sure if the images were in the proper sequence or even accurate, but at least she was beginning to remember! Her dad in a hospital bed, thin as a rail at one hundred ten pounds. His funeral on a bleak, rainy day—everyone wore black, and sorrow etched stony faces.

With pain shredding her heart, a new image flashed—she had gone to a party to get the goods on Fernando Antonio Maltese Del Fuego, the news story that had forced her into hiding. She remembered meeting Matt. He was so handsome, so mysterious. She had driven him to his hotel in her own car . . .

The memory began to fade. She clutched at it. No! Come back! In spite of her plea, the image switched. Her mother and sister were crying and begging her not to go into hiding. They’d lost Dad—and now her. If she didn’t go, they would lose her anyway. She’d be no help to anyone if she were dead.

The image changed again. She was in the laundry room meeting with a man. He was big, shadowy. She tried to focus. It was like looking at someone on undeveloped film. He handed her a tiny velvet pouch. Inside were three sterling silver coins.

“What are these?” she had asked.

“Microchips with the complete books on Del Fuego’s illegal operations.”

The memory hovered over her like a dark, ominous cloud, and she found it hard to breathe. That was where she’d gotten the coins! But who was the man? She would figure that out later. The microchips would back up her testimony and put that monster away for life. And give her the documentation for a great story. Should she tell Matt? First, she needed to know more about his part in her case and exactly what they’d meant to each other. Not enough, she supposed, or he couldn’t have left her like he did.

What happened when she took him to the hotel that night? Was that when they became lovers? How did she feel when they broke up? No doubt the same way she would feel when this was over.



She got up and took one of the sleeping pills the doctor had given to her. She climbed back into bed and thought of Matt's stirring kisses earlier in the afternoon. He'd pulled back when things started to get heavy. But he'd said he loved her. Although he'd lied about so many things, for the moment, she needed to cling to the slight possibility that it was true. A warm glow wrapped around her, and she felt herself drifting into a pleasant hazy state—then a deep, dreamless sleep claimed her.

Sara Jane cried out, breaking the midnight silence of the house. Before Molly could yank herself out of a deep slumber, the crying stopped. The sudden stillness frightened her more than the cries. Oh, God. The strangers! She threw off the covers and rushed to the nursery.

She expected the room to be lit only by a nightlight. Instead, a soft glow came from a small table lamp, highlighting Matt's big frame bent over the crib. He had started the mobile, and the rotation tossed playful reflections on the walls and ceiling to the tune of "It's A Small World."

Staying in the shadows, Molly watched this rough cowboy diaper the baby. Who was this man? Whoever he was, he was capable of incredible gentleness. When he finished the diapering, he lifted Sara Jane into his arms, cradling her. He grabbed a bottle from the warmer, then settled in the rocking chair. He hummed and rocked while he fed the baby.

The baby smiled, and formula ran down her cheeks. Matt wiped the milk away and kissed her. Sara Jane's legs kicked in glee. Matt's eyes took on the softest expression Molly had ever seen. He admired the baby's tiny hand and traced her paper-thin fingernails with his own large index finger. The sight brought a lump to Molly's throat. No matter what the situation was between them, he had come to love Sara Jane, and that was a big point in his favor.

\* \* \* \*

Morning dawned with a blood-red sun and a dry wind stirring bluestem and buffalo grasses in the pastures. Matt, Roberto, and the baby's special bodyguard, Ramon, loaded bags of baby things, Matt's laptop computer and packed suitcases into the Cessna. Molly, Tita, and Sara Jane were already aboard.

The wind sent a tumbleweed across the runway, and Matt wondered if it was an omen, perhaps connected to the disappearance of the strangers. To assure Molly's and Sara Jane's safety, he hadn't told anyone but Alfonso that he planned to fly his precious charges to Buck's ranch.

Roberto talked almost nonstop about the rodeo and the events he'd entered. Matt remembered when *he* had ridden the circuit, when one town had blended into another while he racked up trophies and silver belt buckles—and injuries. His dad had wanted more for him and sent him away to college. He was supposed to come back with new ideas and help run the ranch. Instead, he and his best friend Scott had become agents for the FBI.

It had never been about money, but a need for the excitement that came from righting wrongs. He'd found his niche in a world that had nothing to do with ranching or his maverick brothers. After his dad's heart attack, he'd been forced to put in for phase-out

status, working only on a limited basis. Now this case took top priority, even before the ranch.

Matt sighed. Even with all the problems, the ranch had grown on him. He would be glad to leave the FBI service behind when this was all over. Would it ever be over? And would Molly have to stay in the Witness Protection Program after the trial? Could he walk away and let her disappear from his life again? With the responsibility of the ranch, he couldn't run with her.

And he couldn't let her go. He had to find a solution. But was there one?

## Chapter Six

The nine-seater twin-engine Cessna cut through the sky smooth as silk. Molly had never ridden in a copilot's seat before, and soaring through the blue sky and gold-tipped clouds gave her a euphoric feeling that anything and everything was possible—she'd get her total memory back and the crime boss would magically disappear.

On such short notice, would she and the other five passengers be welcome at Buck's ranch? She turned, leaned out, and glanced back at the others. Roberto had earphones over his ears, and he bobbed his head in time with the music from the portable music player that only he could hear. Tita sported a sleep mask and rested against a pillow, no doubt trying to catch up on her lack of sleep the night before. Although Ramon had a straw hat pulled low over his face, Molly didn't think he was sleeping. His body looked as tense as a junkyard dog. Perhaps he was afraid of flying, but he didn't strike Molly as a fearful man.

Molly couldn't see Sara Jane, but she knew her baby was asleep in the car seat, nice and safe, belted onto the seatback of the seat behind Matt.

Matt looked confident at the controls. And why not? Wasn't controlling things part of his nature? What would happen if he ever gave up his control and just went with the flow? Now wasn't the time to find out, she thought, not while up in the clouds, miles above ground.

Matt flipped some complicated-looking switches, his total concentration on the instruments and operating the aircraft. She noticed for the first time that his mouth was set in a thin line. Except for a few terse answers, he'd been quiet the whole trip. Her euphoria crashed. Over the roar of the engine, she shouted, "Is something wrong that I don't know about?"

His jaw muscle twitched.

"Is it the strangers?" she asked. "You *did* get rid of them, didn't you?"

"Not exactly," he growled, looking grim. "But they're gone."

She wanted to ask more about it, but Sara Jane began to fuss. Molly unbuckled her seatbelt and went to her. The baby clawed at her ears, then began crying in earnest. Molly picked the baby up and hugged her close. "Mommy's here. Don't cry." Sara Jane cried louder. Molly grabbed a bottle of water from the tote bag and brought the baby back to the copilot's seat with her.

"She shouldn't be up here."

Ignoring him, Molly belted herself in, then pointed out the front window. "See the fluffy clouds, sweetie?" Sara Jane arched backward and kicked her tiny feet, her face as red as her corduroy coveralls. Molly used all her strength to maneuver the baby into a prone position. She tried to stick the nipple in the baby's mouth, but Sara Jane turned her head from side to side. Molly paused as though she'd given up, and then slipped the nipple between the baby's lips. "Come on. You have to swallow." Sara Jane began to suck. "Keep swallowing the water, it'll help." Sara Jane sucked a little, then cried again, and with tears flooding her

cheeks, her heart-rending sobs getting louder. “It won’t be much longer,” Matt said, shooting a sympathetic glance at the baby.

Molly nodded and gave a feeble smile. The baby’s cries made her feel inept, helpless, and they were probably driving Matt crazy.

Minutes later, the plane touched down with a thump on the hard, baked-clay ground. Molly let out a sigh of relief; Sara Jane’s ears would stop hurting now.

The countryside looked like the terrain around Matt’s ranch—dry, barren miles of isolation. Only the distant rugged line of purple mountains broke the monotony.

Matt and Molly exited the plane followed by Tita, Roberto and Sara Jane’s shadow, Ramon. Ramon was a slat-sided stick of a man, and his faded blue shirt hung from his bony frame like a tent. Even with that six-gun strapped to his hips, he looked as if the first strong gust of wind could blow him away. Although he lacked the intimidating looks of the usual bodyguard, he was good at watching. His deep-set black eyes took in everything with a chilling thoroughness. It comforted her that extra eyes would be around watching her and her baby—but unnerved her that with the change of location, hidden away here on Buck George’s ranch, that Matt felt his protection wasn’t enough. How much danger were they really in?

A teenaged freckle-faced cowboy leaned against an old school bus parked nearby. He tipped his straw hat, revealing hair the color of hay. “I’m Davy.” His expression was open and smiling. “Welcome to the Bar G.”

Matt shook hands with the young cowboy and introduced him to Molly and Ramon. Molly gathered by the conversation that the others had met him sometime in the past.

“Mom and Dad are waitin’ for you up at the house. I’ll drop you off. Then I gotta go to Mitchell’s Corner for supplies.”

“Want some help?” Roberto asked.

The young cowboy shook his head. “Mom would skin me alive if I lassoed you away before lunch. She’s been fussin’ in the kitchen all morning.”

Tita stepped forward, put her arm around Molly, and hugged her. “We’re in for a treat,” she said. “Wanda is the county’s blue-ribbon cook.”

Molly smiled and jiggled Sara Jane. Her mind wasn’t on food. She watched Matt’s arm muscles flex under his shirt as he easily lifted and thrust their totes and suitcases into the bus’s side luggage compartment. Roberto and Ramon grabbed the last two bags.

Matt took Sara Jane into his arms and crooned to her. “Are your ears better now, sunshine?”

Sara Jane rewarded him with a big dimpled grin that warmed Molly's heart. She and her baby were falling under the spell of this cowboy. Too bad he wasn't the baby's real father. Molly sighed. Would the knowledge of the birth father bring more problems?

The group boarded the bus with Matt carrying Sara Jane. He chose a double seat behind the driver, and Molly joined him. He bounced Sara Jane against his chest. The baby closed her eyes as though Matt's strong arms around her made her feel secure. Then soon, with the lulling movement of the bus, the baby fell asleep.

They rode a while in silence, then Matt said, "There it is, Buck's Ranch. Here, you'd better take Sara Jane." While handing over the baby, Matt's fingers brushed her breast. She tried to ignore the puckering of her nipples. "I gotta corral our bags," he continued, as though unaware that he'd stirred desire in her.

*Good*, the thought. It wouldn't do to complicate things more. Matt had enough to worry about, just keeping them safe. If he knew how much she ached for him—

Molly took a breath and pushed all such thoughts aside. Sara Jane's safety was their top priority. But maybe when this was all over . . .

When they exited the bus, Buck and his wife welcomed them like family. Wanda was a tall, silver-haired woman with an Amazon's bone structure and a smile that never quit. Buck was rangy and lean; the very picture of an aged, hard-living Texas cowman. His handlebar mustache looked like it belonged on an old-time movie sheriff.

The commotion woke Sara Jane and she rubbed her eyes and came alert, twisting in Molly's arms to see everyone. Molly felt the same curiosity and tried to take in everything at once—the people, the house. The whole place, with its underlying Mexican decor, was a virtual museum of rodeo memorabilia with pictures on the walls of cowboys on bucking bulls, trophies in glassed cabinets and cowboy gear displayed on hooks around the room.

A pair of silver spurs hanging by a wire twisted in the breeze coming from an air-conditioning vent and caught the light streaming in a window. Sara Jane cooed and reached for the glittering reflection skittering around the room.

"Oh, what a beautiful child," Wanda said. She kissed Sara Jane's cheek. "If I'm lucky, someday, I'll have a granddaughter just like her."

Matt smiled and puffed up his chest, looking every bit the proud father. Molly's heart constricted. He loved Sara Jane. That was obvious. It would be hard for him when they all went their separate ways. Molly raked a trembling hand through her hair. When the trial was over, could she leave the Witness Protection Program and return to her job, her life? If not, their history had shown that Matt wouldn't remain in hiding with her. Who could blame him? His life was the ranch now.

During introductions and hugs, Sara Jane's special bodyguard, Ramon, stayed on the periphery, arms folded, silent, watching. Matt and Buck discussed the Rancher's Rodeo with sparkling eyes and hyper-enthusiasm. Roberto chimed in. "I'm ready to prove myself in

enough events to move on to become a true bull rider.” Not taking a breath or letting anyone else speak, he kept talking with excitement.

After the teen monopolized the conversation for several minutes, Tita frowned and touched her exuberant son’s shoulder. “Perhaps our hosts prefer to talk about something besides the rodeo, no?”

Laughing, Wanda shook her head. “Rodeoing is all we hear at the Bar G for six months before and six months after. In case y’all ain’t good at math—that’s the whole blessed year.”

Buck sidled up to Wanda like a man half his age and gave her an enormous hug. “And she sure as shootin’ wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Like a young girl in love, Wanda wrapped her arm around her husband’s waist. “I’m so thrilled y’all came early. We can visit a spell before the rodeo opens. Afterward, it gets kinda crazy around here.”

Wanda’s down-to-earth manner warmed Molly’s heart, and she felt she’d known Wanda all her life—the life Molly had only glimpsed.

Buck poked Matt playfully in the ribs. “Let’s corral those bags and get ’em upstairs. I’ll show you where you and your little filly will bunk down.”

Molly watched the men climb the stairs. “Where you and your little filly will bunk down” echoed in her head. Something tightened in her chest. How much did Buck know? It was obvious by the warmth between the men that Matt trusted him. But did he tell Buck the whole story, or did the roughshod rancher think they were really married? *Oh, God.* Did he expect them to share a bed?

She tried not to think of that and forced herself to listen to the conversation on-going around her.

Wanda smiled at Tita. “Bet you’re proud as punch that your boy’ll be playin’ the opening song for the rodeo.”

“Si. I’m proud of Roberto every day of my life. He has *mucho* talent.” She ruffled her son’s hair.

Roberto blushed and turned away. Circling the room, he looked at rodeo pictures with an intensity Molly doubted they warranted.

The men returned, laughing over a private joke. “Hey, boy,” Buck said, looking at Roberto with a teasing glint in his eyes. “Lord A’mighty. After you sing at the opening, you won’t be able to keep those rodeo chicas away with a cattle prod.”

Like a skittish colt, Roberto headed for the door. Wanda cut him off at the pass and wrapped her arm around his neck. “Pay no mind to Buck, honey. He’s just jealous ’cause he

can't carry a tune in a wheelbarrow. I keep trying to bridle his mouth, but his teasin' has a way of slipping the harness."

A pert, young blonde in a skimpy tank top and cut-off blue jean shorts came to the doorway. "Mom, the salad's ready."

Roberto's eyes lit up.

"Thanks, honey." Wanda released Roberto and slid an arm around the blonde's tiny waist. "Folks, this here's our daughter Suzy. She's entered in the calf roping competition. Won enough prize money last year that, if she had a mind to, she could paper her room with it."

Suzy's gaze met Roberto's, and they both blushed.

Matt leaned over and whispered in Molly's ear. "Looks like that young filly gives Roberto about the same thrill as staying on a bull for an eight-second count."

Molly wondered if Matt had gotten so caught up in the Rodeo jargon that he'd forgotten she didn't have a clue what he was talking about. She smiled, assuming eight seconds was good—very good indeed.

"Let's herd this party to the patio," Wanda said. "I got some good grub for y'all."

The enclosed brick patio, decorated with sombreros on the wall and palm trees in huge clay pots, smelled like cooked beef and spicy peppers. Bantering and laughing, the group seated themselves at a picnic table. Buck sat at the head of the table and passed a platter of enchiladas buried in melted cheese. He twitched his salt and pepper handle bar mustache and winked at Molly. "Been waitin' years to meet you." His bass-drum drawl rumbled from his lips with a fatherly warmth.

Molly was surprised. "Years?"

"Yep. Any woman who could lasso Matt Ryan is a mighty special filly."

Molly shook her head. Matt had brought her to his ranch, disconnected the phones, and basically imprisoned her. She managed a laugh. "I think it was the other way around."

Buck chuckled, and his twinkling blue eyes almost disappeared into his leathery face. "That's what I like, a gal with spirit."

Molly darted a glance at Matt. He met her gaze with amusement, apparently unaware of how unamused she felt. She hated deceiving these people, but Matt insisted that they had to continue their married act to keep Sara Jane safe. How could anyone dear to him not know about a wife and child? What story could he have told family and friends to explain why they hadn't met her before?

Roberto and Suzy played eye tag during the meal. After dessert, they excused themselves to go see the new foal. Molly smiled at the sweetness of budding young love, still free of adult complications.

She put Sara Jane down for a nap, then helped Wanda and Tita clear away the dishes. After the cleanup, Wanda looped her arms through Molly's and Tita's and guided them upstairs to admire the quilt she was making.

Molly glanced out the bedroom window. Matt and Buck were repairing busted corral fencing. Matt had taken off his shirt. Sunlight shone on his sun-bronzed back. The sight of his bare skin and hip-hugging jeans sent heat coursing through her veins. She liked the way he pitched in and helped. From what she'd seen in the last few days, there wasn't a lazy bone in that superb body.

Tita was oohing and aahing over the quilt. Molly forced her attention back to the intricate artwork showing Crockett's fight for Texas's independence from Mexico.

"Ol' Davy boy wasn't a Texan, you know." Wanda lowered her voice and took on a confidential tone. "He was born in Tennessee. But he was killed defending the Alamo. In my book, that makes him our hero of heroes."

Molly glanced down at Matt standing in the yard below. He'd saved Sara Jane. That made him her hero of heroes. Too bad she couldn't forgive his lies.

She watched, fascinated, as he pulled off his boots and wet himself down with the water hose. His soaked jeans clung like snakeskin. He turned off the spigot and ran his hands down his chest to smooth away the water. She imagined her hands sliding over those glistening muscles, feeling them flex beneath her fingers.

"Coming, dear?" Wanda asked, leaving the room.

Molly took a shaky breath. "Right behind you."

How would she ever find peace with herself? What were her morals? Matt had been her lover, and a short time later, she'd been with another man—had a child by him. And here she was lusting over Matt again. A man who had left her. What about the baby's father? *Good or bad, dear God, let me remember him.*

The women passed an open door. Inside the room, Molly's suitcase lay on the cedar chest at the end of the bed.

"Hope you and Matt'll be right comfy in this room," Wanda said.

The enormous suite, decorated in an old western motif, shrunk when Molly zeroed in on the king-size bed. Comfy wasn't the word she'd use.



Molly exchanged glances with Tita. Her mouth went dry. She was supposed to share a room with a man she wasn't married to. A man playing a farce to maintain a safe cover for her and her baby. A man she found extremely attractive.

Tita squeezed Molly's arm, offering support.

Wanda gestured to a crib in an alcove near the bay window. "Brought it up from storage. Used to be Suzy's. We freshened it up a bit—Buck painted it, and I put on the rosebud decals. Wanted it to be nice for your little one."

Molly was taken aback by the couple's thoughtfulness. "It's beautiful. Thank you."

"See yonder, down the hill?" Wanda said, pointing out the window to a spouting fountain. That's the arena entrance. We light the waters at dusk. It's plumb beautiful at night."

Molly darted a look at the bed she was expected to share with Matt and rubbed her arms. How would she ever make it through the night?

\* \* \* \*

Cleaning up in the bunkhouse, Matt showered off layers of dirt from an afternoon spent helping Buck do minor repairs to get ready for the rodeo. They had fixed plumbing in one of the arena's restrooms, replaced a couple of short lengths of split wood bleachers, mended a busted chute door, and scoped out other small details that needed attention before the big event.

Helping Buck and his son Davy mend the busted chute brought back all the old feelings.

Matt sighed. He'd forgotten how competing in rodeos could get into your blood. On a whim, Buck had entered Matt's name in a bull-riding event . . . and Matt was tempted. But he wasn't here to ride. He was here to keep Molly and the baby out of harm's way.

Molly seemed to be taking everything in stride, including the news that they would share a room. Sleeping penned in the same stall would be rough. Because of his lies, he knew that Molly had reined in the feelings she was beginning to have for him. And when she finally remembered the cold way he'd walked out on her, any chance for a future for them might die.

God, how he wanted her. Shoot, they wanted each other, but the passion heating their blood wouldn't guarantee a future together. His dilemma paralleled rodeoing—sometimes, all he got was one chance and the high of charging out of the chute. Then, when the bull gave his twisting, snorting objection to being ridden and tossed him on his butt, it was over. The bull had won—and he had lost. With Molly, he wasn't out of the game yet. Yet.

Matt dried off and slipped on the clean clothes he'd placed in the bunkhouse locker earlier. Bone-tired, he headed for the room he would share with Molly and Sara Jane. He tapped on the door. No answer. Molly must have gone downstairs.

He opened the door, and his breath caught. Molly was stepping out of the bathroom wrapped in a big burgundy towel. A fragrance of honeysuckle, and a trace of steamy air trailed her. His body sprang to life, all fatigue forgotten. Molly had swept up her auburn hair in glistening ringlets, revealing a slender, very kissable neck. They stared at each other. She blushed.

“Bad timing,” she said, looking like a rodeo queen caught in a spotlight wearing nothing but her crown.

Matt laughed. “Or good timing.”

“I guess we need a signal.” She arched an eyebrow. “Like perhaps knocking?”

“I knocked. Where’s Sara Jane? I thought I’d take her off your hands for a while to give you a rest.”

Molly edged to the dresser and eased the open drawer closed. “How thoughtful,” she said. “But Tita had the same idea and took the baby to her room for a while.”

“Then there’s just you and me.”

He stepped forward, wondering if the raw huskiness in his voice would frighten or comfort Molly. She clutched her towel tighter, but didn’t bolt.

He was playing with fire, he knew, but just looking at her caused heated desire to pool low in his belly. Tension charged his nerve endings. The sensation was like when the chute opened—he knew he’d likely get thrown, but pride and determination forced him to hang on for as long as he could.

His throat constricted. He wiped his palms on the sides of his jeans. He should hightail it out of here. Now. But he couldn’t seem to move. He drank in her loveliness like a thirsty man lost in the desert. A pulse throbbed in her throat. He longed to touch the pulsing point with his fingers and to match his heartbeat to hers. He moved toward her slowly, ready to stop if she said the word. She remained still, pressed tight against the dresser, her green eyes searching.

He loosened his shirt from his jeans. “One of us is overdressed.”

“Or underdressed,” she said softly. “Like you said, I don’t know what went on between us before.”

“Maybe if I kiss you again, you’ll remember.”

“I remember you lied to me.”

Her words hit him with the impact of a charging bull. “I regret that.” He reached out, but when her eyes didn’t soften, he dropped his arms. “I regret lots of things.” Since he didn’t

want get into all that, he should get the hell out of there, but the vibes oscillating between them gave him hope, and he stepped closer.

Molly pressed one palm flat against the drawer.

“What’s in the drawer, Molly?”

“Stuff from my suitcase.” She tilted her head and gave a sly smile. “I’d do anything to remember our past, even kiss a frog.”

He laughed deep in his throat. “Ribbit,” he croaked.

A smile played at her lips. “Okay, cowboy frog. This had better work.”

Matt’s heart raced. Kissing her would be more than he deserved. He drew her to him, and at the first meeting of their lips, he knew he’d started something that could hurt them both. She held the towel with one hand while the other slid around his neck. Her lips were soft and pliable, and her mouth opened to him. He tasted her sweetness with his tongue, and she met his exploration with an urgency that surprised him.

His breathing grew shallow just thinking about the silky skin beneath the towel, the skin he remembered so well. He trailed a finger from the hollow of her throat to the top edge of the towel, and she let him lower the nubby fabric, exposing her breasts. He stroked the familiar cinnamon-colored mole on her left breast—a beauty mark he’d called it. She quivered under his touch.

He remembered every inch of her. *Remember me, damn it, and how I abandoned you. And then forgive me.* But she didn’t remember him, and as much as he wanted her, he had to wait until she did. And hope for a miracle.

Matt covered her breasts with the towel again. “Thanks for the kiss,” he said, trying to sound casual. He winked. “When you remember us, we’ll take up where we left off.”

\* \* \* \*

Molly felt like he’d thrown ice water on her. She grabbed her jeans and a fringed shirt and retreated to the bathroom. She couldn’t fool herself into believing she’d let him touch her so intimately only to distract him from the open drawer containing the three mysterious coins. She had wanted to distract him all right, but became lost in desire.

When she returned, Matt stood by the window staring out, looking grim. He faced her. “I need to tell you something.”

A shiver slithered through her. Fighting apprehension, she lifted her chin. “Okay. Shoot, cowboy.”

“The pilot and his passenger left on their own, and the sudden way they left looks mighty suspicious.”

“Then I was right to insist that we leave your ranch.”

“Not necessarily. I could have protected you there, but this place works, too, as long as no one knows we’re here”

“What do you mean? Lots of people know we’re here—Tita’s husband, probably your brothers, and goodness knows who else.”

“Alfonso’s the only one. I didn’t tell my brothers.”

“They’ve seen Roberto practicing calf roping, and they know he’s singing on the rodeo’s opening day and how close you are with the boy. You think they can’t figure it out? Tita and Roberto are gone—we’re gone—just days before the rodeo. Your brothers may be boozers, but they’re smart enough to add two and two.”

“Maybe. But the strangers are gone. And my brothers’ drinking isn’t your worry.”

“It is if their behavior affects my baby’s safety,” she snapped with more ferocity than she’d intended. “Parker tried to force you to hire Webb. Besides, admit it, Matt, your brothers’ drinking problems are eating you up. And I care about that.”

Molly winced at a flash of memory—her dad lumbering into the house like a bull in a china shop, smelling of stale beer and urine, shouting curses at her mother. He had chipped away at her mom’s self-esteem, and after years of covering for him, her mom finally had no choice but to leave. Oh, God! Of course! Her wonderful dad, the reporter she’d tried to emulate, had been a drunkard.

“Damn it, Molly. I don’t want to discuss my brothers’ problems. Not with you—not with anybody.”

“Too bad. Your secrets are out of the bag, cowboy. Everyone knows you’ve been an enabler for your brothers. Always picking up the pieces, cleaning up their messes.”

“Enabler?” He snorted in derision. “Bull. I’m family! If I didn’t bail Luke and Parker out, they’d be living in some cheap motel drinking themselves into oblivion. At least this way, most of the time, they’re on the ranch. Safe.”

“Safe? Alcoholics aren’t safe. And neither are the people around them. Luke and Parker are grown men behaving like delinquent boys. Smoothing things over for them is the worst thing you can do. When they don’t have to face responsibility they can keep drinking.”

“Don’t tell me that by helping my brothers I’m making them worse. I don’t buy it.”

He bought it all right. His denial didn’t fool her. The deep hurt in his voice sent pain surging to her heart. She shouldn’t have said anything about his brothers, but a dam had burst inside, and she couldn’t stop the flow. Not now. “Have you ever put their jobs on the line and demanded that they go into an alcohol abuse program, or get out?”

“They’d probably leave, and that would break my parents’ hearts.”

“Their hearts are already broken, Matt. Besides, they left you to handle the problems.”

“How the hell did we get on this subject? The strangers are gone. And my family is none of your concern.”

Molly winced. If he’d slapped her, it wouldn’t have hurt any more. “You’re right. I almost forgot. I’m not really your wife.” She pointed to the door. “You’d better sleep in the bunkhouse.”

“How do I explain not sleeping with my wife?”

“You’ll think of something. You’re so good at lying.”

\* \* \* \*

In the bunkhouse, on a rock-hard cot, Matt tossed and turned, his treacherous body throbbing and swollen with desire. Being unable to satisfy his physical need wasn’t the only thing bothering him. Molly had poured salt onto his festering sibling-rivalry wounds, and he’d responded by striking back with words that hurt. Regret shot through him. The more he thought about her assessment of the situation, the more sensible it sounded.

By morning, Matt had made two decisions—both were risky and possibly life changing. The first he set into motion with a call to Buck at the main house, the second with a bite-the-bullet call to Lone Star Retreat. The alcohol abuse center’s approach was a roughshod intervention and grueling, in-your-face twenty-four-hour sessions. The director couldn’t guarantee the treatment would work, of course, and forcing his brothers into therapy might kill any love they had for him now. But to save them, he had to chance it.

It dawned on Matt that Molly had gone through the same kind of hell—or worse—with her father, and had learned the hard way that without help an alcoholic was doomed. How could he have been so dense and nasty when she tried to help? Her concern about his brothers came from years of personal experience.

Years of experience? Saints be praised! Molly was starting to remember. What else had she remembered? And why had she kept her progress to herself? Lack of trust?

Damn it. Her doubt was his fault, and he had to bridge the confidence gap, because what she knew—and wasn’t aware she knew—could get her killed.

\* \* \* \*

Carrying Sara Jane in one arm and the car seat in the other, Molly hurried toward the arena. She wished now she’d brought the stroller. She took a shortcut past the bunkhouse and told herself it was to save wear and tear on her back and not to catch a glimpse of Matt. Fighting disappointment, she cut through the barn. Halfway through, she froze.

A familiar voice echoed from behind a partition. “No one’s wise to me,” she heard Ramon say.

“No one’s wise to me” weren’t the words she wanted to hear coming from a man assigned to help protect her baby. Molly ducked into an empty stall and placed the car seat at her feet. From her new location, she could see Ramon’s silhouette and realized he was talking on a cell phone.

“Parker’s the weak link,” Ramon continued. “He’d kill to get his due.” A frisson of pure shock ran up Molly’s spine. What was going on? Before she could find out more, a group of cowboys entered the far end of the barn laughing and joking. “Gotta go,” Ramon said, “I’ll keep you posted.”

Molly remained hidden until she was sure Ramon had left the barn. Trembling, she shifted Sara Jane and glanced at her watch. The rodeo was about to open. Matt would be there. He needed to know about this right away. Especially the stuff about his brother.

She grabbed up the car seat and slipped out of the barn while watching for any sign of Ramon. With the coast clear, she hurried across the grounds to the entrance and past a parking area with a haphazard jumble of horse trailers, campers, pickups, and recreational vehicles. Rushing by the spouting fountain and through the gate, she flipped open a small plastic case and showed her pass.

Inside, Molly climbed the bleachers and searched for the section reserved for special guests. The stands held packed rows of rodeo enthusiasts in colorful western attire. Over the aromas of hot dogs and popcorn, Molly smelled sweat, horses, cattle, and hay. She caught sight of Tita, Wanda and Suzy. They all greeted her with big smiles.

“Glad you got here in time,” Tita said, moving down and making room for her and the car seat on the bench. “The rodeo’s about to start.”

Molly remained standing, her body tense. “Where’s Matt?” she asked, trying to catch her breath.

Tita searched Molly’s face. “Is something wrong, Señora?”

Molly knew she’d gained her Señora status back simply because Tita needed to help keep up the marriage deception in order to keep her and her baby safe. Knowing Tita, the lie was costing her. Molly hesitated, then shook her head. “I just need to talk to Matt right away.”

“*Mas bueno* to stay put, or you’ll miss each other in this crowd. He should be here *muy pronto*.”

Molly nodded and sat down, but she kept craning her neck and scanning the crowd for Matt.

The whine of a steel guitar rose above the din of voices, and the crowd stood. In the center of a small stage at the grandstand above the arena, Roberto strummed his guitar and sang the state song in surprisingly deep tones for a teenager.

Tita dabbed her eyes with a lacy handkerchief. "Speck of dust in my eyes."

Molly nodded, her mind on Matt. She would never find him in this crowd. She might as well stay put until the rodeo was over. She might be safer in the middle of the crowd anyway.

"Roberto is entered in two events," Tita said, "barrel racing and calf roping."

"My fingers are crossed for him." She didn't think she'd ever seen a rodeo before, and if she hadn't been so worried, she would have enjoyed the prospect. She gave Sara Jane a bottle and held her until she went limp in her arms.

The rodeo started with a calf-roping event, and Molly watched the participants doing their best to beat each others' times. When Roberto's name was called, Molly squeezed Tita's hand. "Here's what we were waiting for."

Amid whoops and shouts of encouragement, Roberto shot out of a chute on a shiny red quarter horse, chasing after a scampering calf. Reaching mid-arena, he leapt from his horse, wrestled the protesting calf to the ground and trussed it tight in eight seconds flat. Roberto slapped his hat against the dust on the seat of his jeans, and then looked toward the stands at the honey blonde standing next to Tita.

"Way to go," Suzy squealed, jumping up and down in delight.

An amplified voice announced Roberto's score, stating it was "an excellent performance by a promising newcomer." When the crowd cheered, Roberto smiled shyly, clearly enjoying the attention, and then he climbed the fence and joined Suzy. Clowns began to shovel up manure to prepare the arena for the next event.

Molly hoped Matt had seen Roberto's ride. Both Matt and the teenager had been looking forward to it. So why wasn't Matt here?

Calves had been roped and bucking broncs had been ridden. In the grandstands around Molly, people were getting restless, some stretching.

The PA system screeched, and then a voice announced the bull riding competition. The crowd settled down immediately, as though this was the main reason they were here.

"Have you ever seen a bull riding competition?" Tita asked.

Molly shook her head.

"It's the wildest, most dangerous event."

"Yeah," Suzy said with a horror-storyteller's tone to her young voice. "Last rodeo I went to, one of the top riders was gored to death."

Molly rolled her eyes. "Who thought up this so called sport? A guy with a death wish?"

“I keep telling myself it’s not so bad,” Tita said. “Roberto wants to ride a bull in the junior division in Reno.”

“Cool!” Suzy said. “Maybe I’ll enter, too.”

“Go ahead,” Tita said, “if that’s what you want. There are no rules to keep girls out. But make sure your parents’ medical and dental plans are paid up.”

Suzy laughed. “Shoot, I’ve been training on my dad’s mechanical bull since I was six. And I’ve already been dumped in the dirt by sheep and calves.” She lowered her sunglasses with strong-looking fingers and peered over the top. “Besides, I’ve won enough calf roping events to prove myself. Riding a big, bad bull is the natural next step. It’s no biggie.”

Molly shook her head and hugged Suzy. “I like your style, kiddo. I wish I had your guts.”

Suzy winked. “You do. I can tell. You’re a lady who’ll go after what she wants—when you know what that is.”

Molly knew what she wanted. She wanted her baby to be safe. Ramon’s phone call replayed in her head. And she wanted to talk to Matt.

As each rider and his bull shot out of the chute, Suzy and Tita explained the events. “Although an eight second timer is used,” Suzy said, “bull riding isn’t a timed thing. It’s a scored event. Which means you gotta look good, too.”

The PA system screeched again and the announcer said, “Our last rider is a cowboy we haven’t seen around for a spell, folks—all-time champion, Matt Ryan. Wave howdy, Matt.”

Molly’s breath caught, and for an instant, her heart froze.

He was perched on the top of a chute fence, looking like every cowgirl’s fantasy in tight jeans and protective black leather chaps. Matt saluted with his black Stetson, and the crowd roared.

She’d seen Matt’s trophies, but she’d also witnessed a series of bulls throwing their riders—almost stomping them or goring them. Sometimes, the rodeo clowns were all that saved the thrown riders from imminent danger. Matt had admitted that he hadn’t ridden in a long time. Damn him! What wildness possessed him now to risk his neck? He wasn’t just risking his own limbs. All broken up, how could he protect Sara Jane? Molly raked her hands through her hair. Suzy’s tale about the cowboy who was gored to death echoed in her head.



## Chapter Seven

The noon sun bore down through a cloudless azure sky and scorched the rodeo arena unmercifully. Livestock stench hung in the dead, sweltering air. Beneath his black leather protective vest, perspiration soaked through the underarms of Matt's chambray shirt. His vest, or flak jacket as he called it, was hot as hell, but it could save his life if the bull tried to gore or trample him.

Although he understood the dangers, he was confident he could win. He'd learned early on that a man shouldn't be a bull rider unless he believed he could succeed. And he knew the rules by heart—hold the rope with one hand, if his free hand touched the bull or the rope for even a second, he'd be disqualified, and he had to stay on for the eight-count.

While confident, he wasn't without apprehension. His gut twitched with unnerving tension as he watched a bearded cowboy drop the gate behind the dangerous Brahma he'd drawn. He'd seen this bull gore and tear up a man like thoughts of Molly were tearing him up inside. Her image was branded in his mind forever: Molly naked beneath the burgundy towel, his fingers tracing the edge, lowering it, cupping her satiny breast as heat rose between their bodies, tightening his coil of controlled desire to the point of snapping.

Only a dangerous and all-consuming eight seconds on the fire-breathing Brahma bull kicking against the sides of the chute below could release him from his personal hell.

He rubbed his championship belt buckle for luck, then swung his leg over the top of the iron fence, and cleared his mind of everything except the Brahma bull with the golden hide. Dragon Fire, son of the champion bucking bull Bodacious, was known as a man-killer.

Matt took a deep breath. He had his work cut out for him. He eased down and centered himself on the two thousand pounds of romping, stomping fury. He checked his own bull rope of braided leather tied around the bull's middle just behind its shoulders, then plowed his glove into the strap. Beneath the leather, a thin film of sweat coated his hands. Damn. He had only this instant to get his hold right. He flexed his hand and settled his grip into its spot. The bull skittered underneath him. Adrenaline shot through Matt. He dug in his muted spurs and nodded at the chute keeper. "Let 'er rip."

With a clunk the chute gate opened and the Brahma bolted into the arena. Under Matt, Dragon Fire bucked and twisted with fury, doing its damndest to catapult him into the bowels of hell.

Matt hung on. He might go to Hades, but this ugly beef on the hoof wouldn't send him there. Dragon Fire whirled and kicked. The weighted cowbell hanging from the bottom of the bull rope clanged loudly and reassured Matt with the sound. However, the clang sure as hell wasn't there for music—it was a basic lifeline, a weight to help the rope slide off the bull when he was ready to dismount, and avoid tangling his hand up in the rope again once he'd let go.

He saw flashes—fencing, clowns, color. The crowd roared. Going well . . . going well. He was in sync, merged with the snorting, thrashing power and counted the eight seconds in his

head. He'd like to go for sixteen, but the longer he stayed on, the greater his chance of getting tossed—or stomped or gored.

A blaring horn declared the end of the eight seconds.

Matt's heart pounded. Why not go for broke? Show the crowd what a world-class bull rider could do. More important, show Molly.

He counted eight more seconds, heard the crowd roaring its approval, then decided that was enough. Matt brought his free hand down to loosen the gloved grip on the rope and tried to leap free. But his glove was caught in the bull's rope.

\* \* \* \*

The crowd gasped and shot to their feet. "No!" Molly screamed. Her hand jerked to her throat, and her breath froze. She watched, horrified, as Matt struggled to free himself. He whirled and rode the wind on the twisting, kicking bull. His weight seemed to keep the rope from unfastening from the crazed animal. Matt's black Stetson flew off and was crushed beneath the bull's hooves. Oh, God, Matt could be stomped to death right before her eyes, and she couldn't stop it. She wanted to squeeze her eyelids closed to block the horror, but she locked her gaze on him as if watching would protect him.

Terrified shrieks and murmurs rippled through the crowd. Molly clung to her now-crying baby and prayed with all her might, promising anything, everything . . .

As though her prayers had been answered, Matt finally managed to yank his hand from the snared glove and leaped free. The bull charged toward the exit gate. Amid the crowd's cheers, bullfighting clowns herded and blocked the bull's return. Matt bent and grabbed up his flattened hat, then hustled toward the fence with an eye on the stomping fury. He climbed the barricade. At the top, he paused and straddled the rail. Safe.

Tears of relief rolled down Molly's cheeks. Damn Matt! Wait 'til she got hold of him. That reckless, heart-stopping cowboy would wish he'd never seen a bull. Or her!

Looking unruffled, he slapped his hat against his chaps to shake free the dust, then he reshaped his Stetson and plunked it back on his head. The announcer blared Matt's time—sixteen seconds! "Our two esteemed judges agree—Matt Ryan earned a score of ninety-seven based upon style, body position, and control." He chuckled. "And his masterful save was a sight to behold."

The crowd went wild, cheering and stomping their feet. Matt smiled and touched the brim of his hat. His nod to the people in the stands looked subdued, with just the right amount of humility.

Tita and Suzy hugged Molly and the baby. "Yee-hah! Way to go, Matt!" Suzy shouted.

"Hold up folks," the announcer boomed over the shouts. "Let's give credit to the other half of the team. Dragon Fire earned his half of the score for flash and difficulty." His voice took

on an added note of respect. “But then how could the son of Bodacious disappoint us?” The crowd roared again, this time for Dragon Fire.

“Señor Matt sure knows how to take a woman’s breath away,” Tita said, fanning herself with a program.

“Yeah.” Molly squared her shoulders for battle. “And he’s going to pay for it. Mind taking Sara Jane for a few minutes?”

Tita laughed and reached for Sara Jane. “Give him your worst, *triquitruque*.”

Firecracker, indeed. Molly felt more like a bomb about to explode. She dashed down the grandstand steps and right into Matt’s open arms. He smelled earthy, a mixture of sweat and leather. And very, very male. Looking pleased with himself, he drew her tight against him, pinning her arms. She’d love to knock that smug look clean off his face.

“Are you all right?” Molly asked, furious but unable to control the tremor in her voice. She wanted to shove him away—wanted to never leave his arms.

“It’s great to be alive . . . and in one piece.” He bent to kiss her.

She turned her head away and tried to wrestle herself from his grip. “You could’ve ended up dust under that bull’s hooves! Damn you, Matt. What were you thinking? Did you really believe you could control a ton of raging bull?”

He gave her a lopsided grin. “I stayed past the count. In the rodeo game it doesn’t get much better than that.”

“Yeah, well, congratulations,” she muttered. “It almost went another way. Face it, there are things you can’t control.”

“Like you, little darlin’?” He looked into her eyes and caressed her back. Warm feelings rippled throughout her.

“No damn you,” she said thinking of the scene in the barn that had sent her searching for Matt. Her throat felt dry. “Not like me. Like Ramon.”

Matt’s hands stilled, and he stiffened. “Ramon? What the hell’s he got to do with anything?”

“I heard him talking on his cell phone. He’s not the good guy you think he is. I heard him telling someone that no one was ‘wise’ to him. And he said your brother would kill you to get what’s due him.”

Pain flickered in Matt’s eyes. “You must’ve heard wrong. Ramon’s worked for me for almost a year. Couldn’t ask for a more loyal or hardworking hand.”

“A year? Maybe he was planted on your ranch by Del Fuego. What logical reason could Ramon have for saying those things, Matt?”

“I don’t know. But I’ll find out. Hate to fire a man based upon a short, one-sided conversation, but you’ve raised serious questions—”

“Damned straight. Starting now, I don’t want Ramon within fifty miles of my baby. Send him back to your ranch—or to hell. Just keep him away from us.”

“I’ll take care of it. I want you safe—and to feel safe. Wanda will have her cell phone with her. Let’s go borrow it. I’ll get the ranch hands to keep an eye out for Ramon, and when he’s found, I’ll get to the bottom of this.”

Molly’s heart softened. “Thanks,” she said, but meant so much more. This headstrong man was the lead stallion in her roundup of memories—the one who shared the missing half of buried moments.

He took her arm and followed her up the steps to the reserved section. Tita and Suzy waved, and jumped up and down like excited kids. “Great ride, Señor Matt,” Tita said.

Suzy punched his arm. “Ride ’em, cowboy!”

Matt shrugged, and a flush crawled up his neck. “Thanks.” He turned to Wanda, who was jiggling Sara Jane on her knee. “May I borrow your cell phone?”

“Of course. Anything the matter?” Wanda asked, fishing the cell from her pocket and handing it over to Matt.

“Nah. Just a little business to clear up.” Molly heard him order a search of the grounds for Ramon. Then he flicked the phone closed, handed it back to Wanda and said, “We’re going to get something to eat. Want to come along?”

“You go on,” Tita said. “Roberto is getting something for us.”

Matt reached for Sara Jane. “Come to Daddy, sunshine.”

*Daddy.* Molly’s breath caught. She and Tita exchanged glances. Was Tita thinking what she was? That Matt was getting too close, and when she left and took Sara Jane he’d be heartbroken.

Matt buckled Sara Jane into her car seat and then picked up both carrier and baby. Like a real family, they headed down the grandstand steps.

At a nearby food stand, Matt bought hot dogs and drinks. Molly led their way out of the arena, past the spouting fountain, and wished she could climb over the low wall and splash in the misty waters to cool off and forget the men after her and her baby.

She headed to a picnic table under a group of pines. Matt lifted Sara Jane from the car seat and bounced her against his chest. She cooed and grabbed his nose. He laughed and lifted

her high over his head. Molly loved his gentleness, his playfulness. The man was a natural father.

Smiling, Molly removed the wrappers from the hot dogs. “Want catsup, mustard, relish?” She flashed an array of condiment packets.

“The works.” He lowered Sara Jane to the car seat and popped a pacifier in her mouth. “I’ll getcha a fresh bottle of cow juice in a few minutes, sunshine.”

They sat down at the picnic table side by side. Molly handed the doctored hot dog to Matt and stared at hers.

“You like yours plain.”

“I do? It was unnerving that he knew more about her than she knew about herself. She lifted her chin and shot him a look. “Perhaps my tastes have changed.” She slathered catsup on her bun. She took a bite and the next instant wished she’d left it plain. She munched for a moment then skewered him with her gaze. “Why did you ride the bull?”

Matt winked and reached over to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear, grazing her cheek, blazing a trail of heat over her sensitive skin. “You really want to know?” She nodded. He shrugged. “Sexual frustration. Had to work off some of that tension you triggered or explode.”

He took another bite of his hot dog, then ran his tongue over his lips, taking his time to lick away bits of catsup and relish with a thoroughness that quickened Molly’s heartbeat.

Maybe she should ride a bull. Her frustrations were building, tightening her nerves to the point of snapping. “If you’d been hurt, who would protect Sara Jane?”

Matt feigned a sad face beneath the shadow of his misshapen Stetson. “And here I thought you were worried about me.”

She gave his arm a squeeze, then punched it for emphasis. “I was worried about you, and I still am. But my baby is my first priority.”

He reached over and ruffled Sara Jane’s downy hair. “Mine, too.” His voice deepened, and he turned back to Molly. His serious eyes locked with hers. “I won’t let anything happen to either of you.”

She wanted to believe him, but there were still too many unanswered questions. “What about the stuff Ramon said about Parker—that he’d kill you to get what’s due him? What did he mean by that, Matt?”

Matt looked down at his boots for a moment. “It’s just talk. We’re family. But I decided both of my brothers needed to get away for a while, and I’ve sent them on a little forced vacation.”

“Forced?”

“Intervention and treatment.” Matt gave a ragged sigh. “You were right, Molly. I avoided taking action for far too long.”

Adrenaline surged through Molly, flooding her with mixed emotions. “The intervention may have saved their lives. But after what Ramon said, I’m worried that Parker might try to end yours.”

Matt washed a bite of hot dog down with cola. “Don’t worry until there’s something to worry about.”

She sighed with frustration. “Men! I’d say that stallion has already left the corral.”

He laughed, but he looked worried. “You’ve said some things. . .” He paused and clasped her hand. Heat shot up her arm. “I think you’re starting to remember more than you’ve told me.”

Her cheeks flamed hot. Still unsure how much she wanted to tell him, she chose a subject guaranteed to distract. “There was this X-rated dream of us together . . .”

He lifted a brow and a slow, wicked grin spread across his face. “No kidding. This I gotta hear.”

Her comment was a diversionary tactic, but the dream was real enough. . . *The room had been silvery with moonlight. She couldn’t get enough of him—couldn’t tell where her body began and his left off.* Flames shot through her now just thinking about it. No, she couldn’t divulge this. Not now. “It isn’t relevant.”

“Come on, live dangerously.” Matt’s sultry once-over sent a shiver through her. “I’ll tell you if anything like it ever really happened.”

“Living dangerously is what got me into trouble in the first place. Which leads me to something that does apply. I remember going to a party to get the goods on Del Fuego. What I learned forced me into hiding.”

Matt’s eyes held steady. “You remember meeting me?”

“Some of it.” He was the best-looking man she’d ever met—that much she remembered. With his dark, bad-boy looks she’d thought he might even be one of Del Fuego’s men. “Just up to the part where you got into my car.”

“Nothing else?” He sounded disappointed.

She thought of the coins buried at the back of her drawer, and about Matt’s lies. She wanted to trust him, but— “What haven’t you told *me*?”

Something flickered in his eyes. “I’ve told you all I know about the case.”

“And on a personal level?”

He tipped her chin, the touch of his fingers sending tiny flames skittering through her body. “Look at me, Molly. Don’t play games. Tell me what you remember. All of it. What you know could kill you—could kill Sara Jane.”

His touch and the urgency in his words awoke a vivid awareness. In that moment, she believed she could count on him and trust him with her doubts, her fears. “I . . . I saw an image of blood-spattered walls,” she said, wishing the image wasn’t so vivid.

He nodded, his eyes solemn. “It was the so-called safe house where the agents assigned to protect you were murdered.”

Sadness and regret welled in her. She’d already figured out the place and the circumstances for herself, and the knowledge filled her with guilt. She had escaped the hit by taking a risk and breaking the rules. Perhaps, if she hadn’t slipped away to get more information for her news story, her protectors would still be alive, and her baby wouldn’t have been kidnapped and exposed to dangers she couldn’t bear to imagine. The guilt was almost paralyzing.

As though her expression had transmitted her thoughts, Matt turned her fully to him and squeezed her shoulders. “If you’d been there, you’d be dead,” he said. “Don’t doubt that for a minute. Your escape may be the one thing that ensured Sara Jane’s safety. Del Fuego needed her to lure *you*.”

Molly tossed aside the rest of her hot dog; her appetite was gone. She wanted desperately to believe Matt’s evaluation of the situation—it would ease her burden of guilt.

“Anything else?” he prompted.

She took a breath and a leap of faith. “Is Del Fuego a coin collector?”

“Yeah, he is. He’s big on rare coins.”

“What about . . . three antique silver coins?”

“Could be his. Why?” Matt asked.

Her heartbeat pulsed a near-deafening roar in her ears. She met Matt’s gaze. “I have the coins.”

“Damn.” His jaw tightened. “That’s what you were hiding in the drawer!”

Heat scorched her cheeks. To distract Matt, she’d thrown herself at him like a Jezebel wrapped in that burgundy towel. Molly wallowed in shame for a heartbeat or two, then squared her shoulders. “If my source was right, the coins are microchips containing the complete books of Del Fuego’s illegal operations.”

“For cryin’ out loud, Molly!” Matt jumped to his feet, knocking over the last of his drink. “Why didn’t you tell me this immediately?”

With trembling hands she mopped up the spilled cola with a napkin, then stared up at him. “I just couldn’t, Matt. From the very first, I’ve been suspicious of you. Even though I couldn’t remember a thing, it was hard to accept what you were telling me. It just didn’t feel right. Then when I overheard your argument with Parker, my suspicions were confirmed.” Her throat felt dry. “If you’d been straight with me from the beginning—”

Matt jerked away from the hand she had reached out to him and began to pace. “Dear God. Del Fuego won’t stop until he gets those coins back and shovels dirt on your grave.” Matt paused, his face twisting with anger. “It’s that competitive reporter thing, isn’t it? When you remembered being a reporter, you wanted to keep the documentation of his crimes to yourself until you could break your big story.”

The jagged edge of his raw contempt shook her to the core. “No!” she said. “I don’t know for sure if the coins are microchips or if they contain Del Fuego’s books. But if they do, I need the evidence to back up my testimony and put that monster away for life.”

“You wouldn’t save them for a great story?”

“No.” She closed her eyes for a moment. “Maybe.”

The contraction of Matt’s pupils seemed to dare her to admit a truth she’d only now realized.

“Well, okay, yes.” she said. “But I planned to tell you about the coins after I was sure I could trust you. I wouldn’t hold out such crucial evidence just for a story, Matt. You have to believe that!” Her voice broke, and she took a deep breath to regain her composure. “I still have these large gaps of missing memory. I need to know exactly what we meant to each other. It wasn’t enough or you c-couldn’t have left me.”

He recoiled as though she’d punched him in the jaw. “That’s not true.”

“Isn’t it? What happened the night I drove you to the hotel?” She looked down at her hands. “Was that when we became lovers? We were lovers, right?”

“I wish you remembered.”

The anguish in his tone magnified her understanding. He was locked into some kind of honor-bound vow with himself. “So do I,” she said, so soft she wondered if he’d heard her. It was clear that although he wanted her now more than ever, he would deny himself until she remembered everything on her own. And the irony of it all . . . what if the only thing that could trigger that part of her memory would be making love with him again?

“We were more than just lovers, Molly.” Matt’s voice was ragged. “I love you. Always have, always will.”



Her breath caught. She wanted to believe—

“When did you decide to trust me enough to tell me all this?” he asked, his gaze level.

“When I heard Ramon say your brother might kill you—when you almost killed yourself riding that bull.” Molly couldn’t control the tremor in her voice.

Something flickered in Matt’s eyes. “Damn it. Holding things back from one another has done nothing but increase the danger. If we’re going to survive this, we have to work together.”

“Too bad you didn’t realize that from the beginning.” She hated the sarcasm in her tone, but it was the truth, and they both knew it.

He nodded. “I know most of this is my fault, and I’ll do whatever I can to help you learn to trust me again.”

“No more lies?”

“Not to you. That’s a promise.” He rubbed a hand along his jaw. “Can you trust me now? I mean all the way?”

She swallowed. “What do you mean?”

“I need those coins.”

\* \* \* \*

Matt watched Molly slide the dresser drawer open and withdraw a small velvet pouch. Her hands trembled. She turned to face him, her eyes deepening to the greenest green he’d ever seen them. Her tangible hesitancy lashed the air like a whip. “It’s okay, Molly. I’ll get the coins to a micro-tech lab for analysis. We have to know what we’re dealing with.”

He ached all over from riding the Brahma, but the sight of Molly’s thick auburn hair flowing about her shoulders and her slim body encased in those faded jeans shot painkilling endorphins through his veins. Old images flickered in his head. They had parked somewhere to share information, and had ended up sharing passion.

*Midnight darkness slipped from the Dallas sky to pool in the alley about them like a cocoon. He removed the Styrofoam cup with the dregs of coffee from her hand and kissed her—lightly, then harder, thrusting his tongue into a mouth warmed by the coffee and sweetened by cream and sugar. High on the adrenaline of the impending danger, they gave in to the heat and excitement of one another’s arms, then crawled into the back seat and went at it wildly like teenagers with raging hormones . . .*

Matt thrust the memories back to a safe corner of his mind and took the velvet pouch from her hand. He shook out the coins and examined them. The coins were highly polished and could pass for new quarters except—

“See this?” When he bent close, Molly’s fragrance wafted around him. Her skin, still warm from the blistering sun, carried an enticing musky scent, uniquely Molly. He cleared his throat. “This coin has a series of almost imperceptible grooves around its edge, like it’s been split in two and then put back together. I think we’ve got something here.”

Matt snaked his free arm around her and gave Molly’s waist an affectionate squeeze. Their gazes met, which sent a jolt of electricity charging between them. Her eyes were unfathomable green pools that darkened, softened, and dared him to take the plunge. He traced his thumb over the pulse throbbing in her neck and groaned at the softness of her skin. Then he dug his fingers into her silky hair.

Months of longing evaporated. The memory of the last time they were together between rumpled sheets pushed up, consumed him, stole the air from his lungs. He desired her now even more. Molly’s warm hands slid up his chest, gliding over his shoulders, circling the back of his neck. She moistened her lips, parted them, tempting him. He reached behind her and dropped the coins and pouch on the dresser. The coins came to rest with a soft jingle.

Then he kissed her. Forgetting everything but here and now and how much he wanted her. The texture of her lips, familiar as his own, and the taste of her rushed through him with the force of flood waters, taking him along, sweeping him away on raging currents.

His cell phone rang. He ignored it.

Sara Jane began to whimper from the crib by the window. For a moment, caught up in a stampede of passion, they both ignored the cries.

Breathless and flushed, Molly pulled away. “I have to go to Sara Jane.” She gestured with her head toward the ringing that came from inside his duffel bag. “You’d better get that. It might be important.”

Matt cursed under his breath. He’d almost stepped over a line that shouldn’t be crossed until she had full memory recall. “Damned interruptions,” he muttered, although he knew he should welcome them for forcing him back to sanity. He grabbed the cell phone from his duffel bag and savagely punched a button. “Matt here,” he growled.

“Matt, we got problems,” Alfonso said.

He was instantly alert. “What’s wrong?”

“Some of the vaqueros saw Webb and his pilot, Paulo, hanging around again. I sent some men out to the west sector to look for them. Want me to hold a hard line with those buzzards?”

“Yeah, I do. Call the sheriff. As far as I’m concerned, they’re trespassing.” Matt frowned. He’d like to be the one to find those bastards and personally run them off for good. But at the moment, he had a more important job to do.

“One more thing,” Alfonso said. “The hombres from Lone Star Retreat took Parker and Luke away in a helicopter. Your brothers were so *borracho* they thought it was a big joke. But when they sober up, you’re in for trouble.”

“You think I did the wrong thing?”

“No. They’ll thank you some day.”

“I won’t hold my breath. I’ll go see them when they’ve had a day or two to dry out.”

“When are you coming home?”

“Not soon. I have to make a quick flight to San Antonio. Besides, with those guys lurking around, I can’t bring Molly back there. My first priority is to keep her and the baby safe.”

Matt flipped his cell phone closed and turned at a sound behind him. Molly stood in the doorway. How much had she heard? “Throw a couple of things together and some formula for Sara Jane,” he said. “We’re flying these coins to the federal lab in San Antonio, and we might have to stay overnight.”

She let out a sigh of relief. “Good. I’d be uneasy trusting them to anyone but you.”

Matt’s heart swelled at her words, but after that earth-moving kiss, how uneasy would she be spending the night in a hotel with a cowboy who wanted her more than he’d ever wanted any woman?

\* \* \* \*

In San Antonio, Matt and Molly turned the coins over to a micro-technician in a white lab coat who had them split open in no time. Placing them under a powerful microscope, he pointed with a long thin metal instrument and explained to Matt and Molly what they were looking at. “Looks like an integrated circuit with the capacity to hold reams of data.”

“Can you extract the data?”

“It can be decoded and read with a probe scanner. How soon do you need it?”

“Yesterday,” Matt said, feeling the pressure of time.

“Retrieval must be done with great care to avoid losing the data. Needs special equipment. I’ll have to send it to our main lab.”

Matt was disappointed at the delay, but encouraged to learn the coins were definitely camouflaged microchips. He took the baby from Molly’s arms and the three of them returned to their rented car.

Molly sighed. “I thought the lab tech would do the work on site and get back to us within the hour.”

Matt laughed as he buckled Sara Jane into the infant car seat. "Like taking film to a one-hour processor?"

Molly darted a sharp look at him. "Are you laughing at me, Matt Ryan?"

"With you, darlin'." He winked. "Never at you."

They took the freeway and in the glow of an orange-colored setting sun, a panoramic view of San Antonio's skyline and the Tower of the Americas glistened before them.

"You know what I'd like to do when Del Fuego's behind bars? Go to the observation deck of that tower," Molly said.

Matt changed lanes and headed for an off ramp. "Why wait? We can go now."

They went to the top, and with Sara Jane in one arm and his other around Molly, he watched lights blink on throughout the city. He helped Molly pick out the approximate location of the Alamo, the cradle of Texas history. "Too late to visit there today," he said.

"I'm too bushed anyway. I just want to take a hot bath and crawl into bed."

Finding a place to stay turned out to be more difficult than Matt expected. He regretted not making reservations before leaving Buck's ranch. Exhausted, they checked into a cheap motel by the airport, the only vacancy they could find on short notice. The room was about the size of a postage stamp and had twin beds. The rattling air-conditioner spewed damp, moldy air.

"I'll make this up to you, Molly, I swear," Matt said, taking in the patches on the bedspreads and the dirty threadbare carpet.

"This is okay. Really," Molly assured him. "But I'm starved. Call for some pizza or something, will you? After I bathe Sara Jane and put her down with a bottle, we can eat."

Matt ordered the food then joined Molly in the bathroom where she was on her knees leaning over the tub bathing Sara Jane. Her jeans molded to the cute bottom he'd always loved. His fatigue miraculously lifted, and he felt his body grow rigid with desire. He tucked his thumbs into the waistband of his jeans to keep his hands out of trouble.

"Mind if I help?" Did she notice the huskiness in his voice? The bulge at his zipper? "I'm a great bath-giver."

She smiled up at him. "I'll bet. You can hand me a towel in a minute. I'm almost finished."

He grabbed the towel and held it in front of him. The cramped quarters forced Matt to sit on the lid of the toilet to stay out of her way. The walls seemed to close in and wrap them in a halo of humid air and intimacy.

Molly supported her tiny daughter with one hand while she washed her with the other. The baby's hair glistened with bubbles. She was cooing, not minding the bath one bit. Molly was a great mother, loving, gentle. Through all the trouble, she'd shown courage and determination that swelled his heart.

He already felt married to Molly. It was hard to remember he wasn't. And he felt altogether too comfortable in his role as the baby's father. He couldn't feel closer to her if he really was her father. Molly lifted Sara Jane out of the tub, and he opened the towel and took the dripping baby confidently into his arms. Playing daddy felt so right—so very, very right.

Later, while they ate pizza and sipped colas, worries about the coins nagged at the edges of Matt's mind. He'd been so excited about what they could be that he hadn't thought any further. "Your source—the one who gave you the coins—do you remember his name?"

"Maybe Ernie . . . or Arnie. He was a detective. I remember that much. But he's like a shadow, and I can't bring his face into focus."

Molly's dossier said that she'd been meeting with a detective. Only the dead agents knew the guy's name. It was suspected—supposed, really—that he might be Sara Jane's father.

Matt was strangely encouraged by Molly's inability to bring the guy's face forward from her hazy memories. If they'd been lovers, her memory loss wasn't good for the guy, whoever he was. "You lived in so many cities while in hiding; he could be from any of them. But you worked in Dallas so we'll start there."

Molly dabbed at the pizza sauce clinging to her lips. "Start what?"

"I'll get a list of all the local private investigators from my Dallas contact. If you don't recognize any of the names, we'll widen the search."

"Why is it important? You look worried."

Matt considered keeping his concerns to himself, then remembered his vow to her. "I am worried. Somehow, this guy got the coins for you, and just the fact that they passed through his hands makes him a possible target. We need to get him some protection."

"Oh, God. I hadn't thought of that. He could be murdered!"

Matt touched her hand. "Easy. I'll get the list faxed to me. We'll have it by morning. Maybe seeing the names will trigger the right one." He wanted to get her mind off this. No sense in allowing her to stew about it all night. "What about other memories?" Seeing her on her knees earlier had brought questions of another sort to the forefront. *Do you remember how good we were together? How good we could be again if only—*

She shook her head, dashing his hopes.

After they took separate showers—his a cold one—they fell into their respective beds. Matt tossed and turned. He was acutely aware of Molly less than an arm's length away, of her soft

breathing and of his married feelings and desires. Not tonight, he chanted to himself, as if some sort of self-hypnosis might quell the raging emotions. After a couple of hours of repeating the mantra, he finally fell into an exhausted sleep.

The next morning, after checking with the lab technician and being assured that the microchip data was top priority, they flew back to Buck's ranch. The list of Dallas private investigators was waiting. Molly scanned it and came up with the name Arnold Kenner. They called him at once and got only an answering machine.

"I'll send a couple of agents to locate him." Matt had a bad feeling that it might be too late already. But he didn't want to worry Molly until he knew for sure. "When the agents find Arnie, we'll go talk to him. He could have some of the missing answers."

Molly nodded, seemingly satisfied that he'd done all he could. And he had. But would it be enough?

Matt waited another day before he called Lone Star Retreat. Before anyone could answer, he hung up. *Damn yellowbelly, that's what he was.* He paced for a couple of minutes, and then placed the call again.

The news wasn't as bad as he'd expected. With a little intimidation, his brothers had signed themselves in. Although they grumbled and threatened bodily harm to everyone they met, they were at least attending the rehabilitation sessions. Matt still didn't know if he'd done the right thing by them or not—only time would tell. But there was just too much else going on to have to deal with his jackass brothers' drunken antics. At least they were out of harm's way, and getting the treatment they needed.

Now he could concentrate on Molly. He didn't want to leave her alone, not for a moment, and he slept on a daybed in the same room with her and Sara Jane. For the next couple of nights, he asked her the same question—had she remembered anything more? She would tell him about the latest memories that, one by one, were beginning to surface—but they weren't the ones he most wanted—and needed to hear.

## Chapter Eight

In many ways, the Rodeo was a blessing. It meant getting up early and going to bed late bone-tired. Even though Matt and Molly had missed a day of it while away in San Antonio, Wanda and Buck welcomed all the help they could get. Molly enjoyed the varied jobs, from cooking to pitching hay to currying horses. She was willing to do anything that allowed her to keep busy, to keep her mind occupied, and to keep Sara Jane in sight.

In the few days they'd been here on the ranch, she'd learned more about ranching than she'd ever thought she wanted to know. The funny thing was—she loved it, especially working with horses. Matt was always nearby, encouraging, teaching. He made her feel safe. If Ramon was one of Del Fuego's men, then it was a sure bet he had told the crime boss where she was. Del Fuego might send someone after her and her baby at any time.

She wasn't overly concerned at the moment. She and Sara Jane were always surrounded by a horde of people in the daytime, and Matt stayed close after dark. Sharing a room with Matt became more difficult each night. He was more than a guard. He helped bathe and feed Sara Jane, rocked her to sleep in Wanda's old rocker, and sang to her in deep vibrant tones. Just like a father . . . like a husband helping his wife.

Molly picked up the scent of his maleness the moment he entered the room and felt the room contract with his larger-than-life presence. But it was no longer smothering or confining—he made her feel safe. He'd taken to showering in the adjoining bathroom and was in there now, humming, filling the place with the fragrance of the masculine-scented soap he favored. She could imagine him behind that closed door breathing in steam, soaping his virile nude body, running the sponge over his lean muscles . . .

Her heart pounded wildly. She couldn't face him in her present frame of mind; it was too dangerous to his self-control—to her self-control. Molly settled Sara Jane down for the night, turned the light low, removed her cotton robe, and scurried into bed. She closed her eyes, then opened them a slit when the bathroom door rattled. Matt came out shirtless, his sun-bronzed skin glistening with droplets of water. His muscular shoulders were wide, smooth, his abdomen lean and flat. He was magnificent.

Matt went to the crib and brushed the soft curls from Sara Jane's forehead. "Night, sunshine," he whispered. He then moved in silence to the king-size bed where Molly lay motionless and stood so close she could hear him breathing. He covered her shoulder with the sheet and turned out the light. "Sweet dreams, little darlin'," he said, barely audible, and then turned away.

What a shame for him to sleep on that narrow daybed alone when she had a whole king-size bed to share. In that moment, she hated her doubts and his control—but not him.

When sleep finally came, it brought a flood of dreams. She woke up from the last one trembling. She couldn't recall the details of the dream, but it had triggered something in her brain. And she remembered making love with Matt—and that she'd loved him to the bottom of her soul. She remembered him leaving. He'd told her it was to keep her safe. Del

Fuego's men would be watching him. He could inadvertently lead them right to her. She hadn't cried, but her heart had shattered.

She lay very still. Something else lurked at the edge of her mind, tried to break through. Something important. Rubbing her aching head, she struggled to pull the memory forward. Was it about Del Fuego—or Matt? She wanted to wake Matt and talk to him about it. It seemed important. She slipped from her bed. With soft moonlight illuminating her path, she tiptoed to his side and looked down at him. The sheet rested below his belly button. One of his legs was bent and exposed. Emotions—desire, fear—warred within her. She stepped back and considered the consequences of waking him.

Her failure to remember how it had been between them was all that kept them apart. Pain shot through her. As long as there was a chance that she'd have to stay in a Witness Protection Program, there was a chance he'd turn her protection over to someone else and leave her again. Nothing had changed on that score. He had his job and the ranch. And she had no guarantees.

\* \* \* \*

The day after the rodeo was over, Buck's entire group of family and guests piled into the old school bus and traveled forty miles to Mitchell's Corner—an oasis surrounded by wilderness. Matt had always liked the small horseshoe-shaped town. The businesses consisted of a one-story general store at the center of the closed end of the U, with smaller specialty shops painted barn red on both sides of the dirt road. The enterprises were all connected by cedar shingled awnings and mesquite wood sidewalks and hitching rails. Buck parked in a dirt lot at the edge of the open end of the U. No vehicles were allowed in the shopping area, only horses.

Buck and his son, Davy, left the group to get haircuts. Matt followed the women, and waited outside the shops while they bought new clothes and whatever else ladies purchased when they got together to shop. To be near Suzy, Roberto tagged along, too.

While they were all busy, Matt slipped into a jewelry store and bought a gold heart-shaped locket for Molly. He knew just the message he wanted to convey—something to show her she had his heart. With his purchase tucked in the shirt pocket over his heart, Matt, glad to have time to himself to make some calls without the others around, leaned against the hitching rail and pulled his cell phone from his pocket. There had been no report on the coins, and he was getting itchy.

"What's the scoop?" he asked when he got the lab technician on the line.

"Not back from the main lab yet," the tech said. "Retrieving the info can be touch and go and requires patience. They don't want to inadvertently destroy the data. Give them a few more days."

Damn. "Call me the minute you have something, anything, day or night." If the chip contained the information he hoped it did, Del Fuego would have a helluva lot more to worry about than chasing after Molly and her baby.



Matt had just stuck his cell phone back in his jeans when it rang. “Matt, it’s Luke.” His younger brother sounded sober—and scared.

The skin on Matt’s neck prickled. Luke wasn’t one to scare easily. “Luke, what—”

“Help me, Matt. I need your help.”

Matt shook his head, even though his baby brother couldn’t see the movement. “You gotta stay and finish the program.”

“The hell with the program! Parker’s dead!”

Pain shot through Matt. He slid down the post he was leaning against and sank to his haunches. “Is this a sick joke—to get back at me?” Matt could barely form the words, and they came out ragged, husky.

Luke began to weep. He never cried, even when Parker had slammed his finger in the truck door when he was ten. “The sheriff’s here. He thinks I killed my own brother. My own—” Luke’s voice broke. “Matt, you gotta help me!”

Matt’s throat ached, and nausea rose from his gut. A black fog of grief washed over him.

“Matt? Matt!”

He drew in a shaky breath and reached down into a deep calm place, the center where he went for strength to keep from losing control. “Where are you?”

“The ranch.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t—Oh, God, Matt . . .”

Luke was losing it. Matt could hear his brother’s control crumbling. “Luke! Calm down and tell me what happened.”

“When Parker and me sobered up and found our butts at Lone Star Retreat, we were mad as hell. We played along for a day. Then with Webb’s help, we broke out and hightailed it back to the ranch.”

“Webb! That guy’s bad news, Luke.” Matt had sized him up as trouble the moment the lowlife came around asking for a job.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Luke said. “Webb’s the dirty polecat who killed Parker. I tried to tell the sheriff that, but he . . . he won’t listen!”

“You saw Webb do it?”

“No. But when we got back home, he offered Parker some kind of deal that just didn’t sit right with him.”

“What do you mean? What kind of deal?” Suspicion coiled around Matt like a lariat.

“They walked down the road a piece, out of earshot. All I caught was your name and something about the ranch. Parker started cussin’ and kicked Webb off the ranch. Webb said he’d be sorry as hell.”

That confirmed it. Matt was certain now that he’d been marked for murder, and Webb wanted Parker to do it. Molly had been right. Ramon was probably in on it too. “What’s the sheriff got against you?”

“It was my gun that killed Parker, Matt! My gun!” Luke was sobbing now, but managed to finish. “Him and me, we rode out to ol’ windmill Carlita with the Morales sisters to do a little neckin’ and drinkin’. We all got drunk, and the girls left mad. Can’t remember why. Then I passed out. When I came to, Parker was dead, and my gun was in my hand.”

“Damn it, Luke! Can’t you see it’s the drinking that gets you into these messes?”

“I didn’t do it, Matt. I swear I didn’t!”

Matt heaved a sigh. “I know, Luke. I know you wouldn’t kill your own brother.” Any more than Parker would kill him. The whole thing was a nightmare. “Are you sure Parker’s dead? I mean, maybe he’s just wounded or—”

“He’s dead, Matt. Parker’s gone. And you gotta help me. Webb might kill me, too. He’s a bad dude, and I know too much now. I overheard him and his pilot talkin’. Webb said the storm had shifted, and they had to handle the golden squaller with care. At the time, their words meant nothin’ to me. But after thinkin’ about it, I got worried. I told Parker what I heard, and he said it was nothin’. That with Paulo being a pilot and all, it was probably just weather talk.”

Matt didn’t like the sound of the men’s conversation either. “What do you think they were talking about?”

“I figured squaller meant baby. You know, ’cause babies cry. Golden might be like the goose that laid the golden egg. Hell, I don’t know. I’m just guessin’. Anyway, there’s more. Some guy named Del Fuego is in the mix. I don’t know for a fact, but I think he’s after little Sara Jane.”

Matt felt his stomach muscles contract. He clutched the cell phone so hard he heard the plastic cover crack. “They are, but there’s more to it. But back to you—”

“Come home, Matt. They’ll railroad me if you don’t.”

“First you need an attorney. I’ll get one for you. Keep your mouth shut until he gets there. You hear me? Don’t say anything. Lives may depend on it, Luke.”

After his brother promised not to talk to anyone but a lawyer, Matt called a big-shot Dallas attorney with a never-lose reputation. He made the arrangements and hung up with guilt pounding through his blood. Indirectly, by not leveling with Molly, he’d been responsible for bringing trouble to the ranch. He’d failed Molly, his brothers, his parents. . . .

As if Parker’s death wasn’t enough, this news could kill Dad. Matt got his dad’s doctor on the line and told him about Parker. “I want to get Dad sedated before I tell him about my brother. I want to avoid another heart attack.” The doctor agreed that sedation was an advisable precaution.

Once everything was arranged, Matt, his knees weak, leaned against the railing. The desperation in Luke’s voice had been unmistakable. Matt closed his eyes. It seemed the sheriff and his men were taking the easy way out. Yet, how could he fault them when his brother admitted to owning the smoking gun?

Matt tightened his jaw. It was up to him to prove Luke’s innocence and someone else’s guilt—probably Webb or Paulo. And, sadly, he had to arrange for Parker’s funeral. To do those things, he had to go home. But with the heightened danger at the ranch, he couldn’t take Molly and the baby with him. And he couldn’t leave them. Without him, they were dead.

Matt moaned low in his throat. Dead. Parker was dead. The words kept echoing in his mind. Cupping his hands and shading his eyes, Matt looked through the general store window. Surrounded by Wanda, Suzy, and Tita giggling Sara Jane, Molly was trying on a straw hat with yellow flowers on it. She made an adorably funny face and struck an exaggerated pose. Everyone laughed, even Roberto.

Molly and the baby were safe surrounded by people who loved them. Del Fuego’s men couldn’t know they were in Mitchell’s Corner. Matt decided he could take a break from his watch long enough to go somewhere alone to lick his wounds and try to rein in the control he felt slipping away.

*Parker is dead.* The echo grew louder. Matt didn’t know where he was going. Just away. He passed a liquor store. Then, with a wide, determined stride, he reversed direction, marched inside, and bought a quart of bourbon. He grabbed the bottle by its neck and charged down the street. When he reached the edge of town, he kept going, breaking into a run, as though the demons of hell were on his trail. Gravel crunched under his boots loud as thunder.

The sun, a simmering blot of white in the faded blue sky, pounded down on him, heating the bottle within his grasp, branding his fingers. Breath burned in his lungs, but he couldn’t stop running. He tripped over tumbleweeds and large stones. A small brown rabbit scurried across his path.

With his pulse pounding in his ears, he gulped air pungent with stinking scrub brush. The land was rougher now, more brush scattered around and boulders the size of a Brahma bull.

*Keep going. Keep going.* He couldn't outrun his grief, yet he staggered on, scrambling over stones, going farther and farther away from people, their laughter, while wishing the dry crusty earth would open up and swallow him whole and put him out of his misery. He sucked in hot dry air in agonizing gulps.

When he couldn't run anymore, he dropped down to his knees in the shadow of a semicircle of giant boulders and scraggly mesquite trees. Panting, he stared at the bottle of bourbon. He hated the damned painkiller in his hand—hated that he had a damned good excuse to drink it.

He set the bottle down on a small table rock in front of him and stared at the whiskey. Seized with emotion, he stood and picked up a boulder the size of a bowling ball and aimed at the bottle. A direct hit would smash the bottle to smithereens. He turned and hurled it in the opposite direction. Hurling another and another, he drained his strength. Hurling. Hurling.

Spent, he sank down beneath the shade of a mesquite tree and stared at the tea-colored liquid in the bottle gleaming in the sunshine—devil's brew, they called it.

*Damn. Damn. Damn.* In FBI training school, he'd learned to think on his feet, keep the upper hand, control things as they came. His throat tightened. Nothing he'd learned had prepared him for the pain of losing Parker. They'd had their differences, but Parker was his big brother. And Parker was gone.

\* \* \* \*

Molly dug her knees into White Queen's flanks the way Matt had taught her. The horse she had borrowed settled into a smooth gait and headed in the direction she'd last seen Matt. She wanted to gallop, but good sense won out over urgency. She clenched the reins. What was that cowboy thinking? What if she couldn't find him? She said a little prayer.

There was a cluster of boulders and acres of prickly flatland. And that was it for miles around. She shouted Matt's name and listened hard for an answer, but the only sounds she heard were the clopping hooves of her own horse and the gusting wind. She pressed on.

Up ahead, on a rise of land, under the shade of a giant mushroom-shaped boulder, Matt sat beneath the overhang, staring at a bottle of whiskey glistening in the sun.

Molly let out a sigh of relief and jerked on the reins. "Matt!"

He looked up, his face grim under the shadow of his Stetson. "What the hell—"

"That's my line," she shot back. "What's the deal with the whiskey and the madman act?"

Ignoring her question, he jumped to his feet and rushed toward her. Under that sweat-dampened beige chambray shirt, she could imagine his washboard stomach and well-defined biceps. Before he reached her, she dismounted and flipped the reins around a branch of a gnarled mesquite tree. Matt grasped her arms roughly.

“That hurts,” she said, then shook his hands loose from her arms.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, his voice husky with spent and unspent emotion.

“I might ask you the same thing. What’s going on?”

He drew her out of the searing heat into the shelter and shade of the boulders and pulled her down beside him. She watched as he pulled the hat from his head, raked shaking fingers through his hair, and leaned his head back against the rock. She’d never seen him like this . . . in such agony.

She drew up her legs and wrapped her arms around them. “Matt, I saw you looking at me through the store window. You looked like hell. I thought you might need a friend.”

“Where’s Sara Jane?”

“She’s with Tita and Roberto.”

“How did you find me?” His words rolled out in a deep, masculine rumble and sounded almost lost.

She laughed, hoping to make him smile. “In a place the size of Mitchell’s Corner, a man like you stands out.” He’d stand out anywhere. “I checked the stores one by one. Nothing. Then, as I left the barbershop, I saw you. You tore out of that liquor store like demons were after you.”

He laughed, but there was no humor in his eyes. “They were.” He gestured with his head toward the horse. “Whose mare?”

“Belongs to Jasper Moore.”

“Who?”

“Just a sweet old guy. That’s White Queen. He was tying her to a hitching post. At first, he refused to help me, but Buck came along then. He knew Jasper, so. . .”

She met Matt’s gaze. “Okay, it’s your turn, cowboy. What’s wrong?”

Matt remained silent, his profile looking chiseled in rock as hard as the boulders sheltering them from the blistering sun. The hot breeze lashed his features, ruffled his inky hair. She waited, impatient to know what had sent him running wildly, but willing to give him whatever time he needed.

Silence stretched between them.

Matt's long-fingered hands drew her attention. They were callused, strong looking. Steady. He picked up a thick mesquite twig and scraped a deep line in the crusty dirt. The twig snapped under the pressure. "Parker's dead." Matt's voice broke. "Murdered."

A jolt of pain shot through Molly. "Oh, Matt, no." She put her arms around him, stroked his back. "I'm so sorry."

They clung to one another, Matt stiff in her arms, as though holding in the pain. She felt his hot, ragged breath in her hair. He withdrew from her embrace too quickly, and his gaze fell away. She settled back down beside him, fighting unreasonable hurt feelings.

Then it hit her. "Was Parker murdered at Lone Star?" It had been at her urging that Matt had sent his brothers to the alcohol abuse center. If she were responsible—

"No." He gave a bitter laugh. "If he'd stayed there, he might still be alive." Matt paused as though gathering strength. "It gets worse. Luke's charged with his murder."

She closed her eyes, imagining Matt's anguish, hurting for him. She touched his hand, squeezed it. When he didn't respond, she removed her hand. She cleared her throat, but it took a second time before the words would come out. "Any clues pointing to the real killer?"

"You didn't ask if Luke did it." Matt's body language remained rigid, and his voice held its hard edge, but his eyes softened a fraction.

"Luke's a scrapper and a lover boy," she said, keeping her voice soft. "But not a killer. Any ideas?"

"Luke thinks Webb did it. Luke heard some things."

"What kind of things?"

Matt stared straight ahead, his features chiseled, angry. "The point is Webb and Paulo have been seen around the ranch again, so they had the opportunity."

Molly's stomach knotted. Parker's murder and Luke's arrest changed everything. Matt was going back. She knew it. He had to help with the murder investigation and arrange the funeral. She wanted to go with him, help him through this bad time, but she couldn't take Sara Jane to a place where murderers were lurking around. Molly squared her shoulders. "Luke must be terrified there alone. When are you leaving?"

A muscle in Matt's jaw twitched. "Molly, I'm caught in a tug-of-war, and I'm about to be pulled apart." He raked his hair back from his face. "I'm needed at the ranch, but I can't leave you and Sara Jane."

But he would. Blood was thicker than—"Luke will need a good lawyer," she said.

"Already called one."

“Have you told your folks?” Molly didn’t want to think about him leaving. She’d known it was bound to happen, just not so soon.

“I called their doctor. Because of my dad’s heart problems, I needed to get him sedated first.”

Admiration for him welled up in Molly’s heart. Before Matt had allowed himself to give in to his own rage and pain and ran off like a madman, he’d handled things well. He was a strong man, a considerate man, and she loved him with all her heart.

She stared at the unopened bottle of whiskey. “I’d like to get back to Sara Jane. Will you come with me?”

\* \* \* \*

On the bus ride back to Buck’s ranch, Matt sat in the back with Buck and told him what was going on. “I need backup protection for Molly and the baby.”

Buck offered four of his most trusted vaqueros as bodyguards, two for daylight hours and two to watch the house at night. He introduced Matt to the men when they returned, and Matt hired them on the spot. The nighttime crew was to start immediately.

Matt returned to the room he shared with Molly, his mind now free to think of his other problems. He helped Molly feed and bathe Sara Jane, then together they tucked the baby in.

He belonged here with them, and the thought of leaving was killing him. Matt paced a dozen steps, then opened a window. Sweet night smells of mesquite and the range drifted inside. He stood there a few moments staring out at the star-studded sky.

He felt Molly watching him. “I’m stiff from the long bus ride,” he said. “I’m going for a walk, but you’ll be safe. I hired a couple of Buck’s most trusted vaqueros to keep an eye on the house. They won’t let any unauthorized people near the place.”

“So that’s what you and Buck were conspiring about.” Looking thoughtful, she folded her arms and leaned against the doorjamb. “Want some company? I’ll ask Tita to sit with Sara Jane.”

He needed to be alone, needed to sort things out. He almost shook his head.

“I have something to tell you,” she said with urgency in her tone.

He forced a grin. “After a declaration like that, how could I turn you down?”

Fifteen minutes later, under a black velvet sky strewn with glittering stars, they strolled toward the lighted fountain. The shimmering emerald waters were a sharp contrast to the darkened arena. “When I saw you on that bull,” Molly said, “my heart almost stopped. Weren’t you afraid?” He was grateful that she’d steered clear of talk about Parker or Luke.

“Nah. Couldn’t mount the critter if I were worried about him, or about getting hurt. Can’t be afraid of life.”

“How about losing your life?” she asked softly.

He suspected they weren’t talking about bulls anymore.

The moon slipped from behind a cloud, and the ranch seemed to glisten in the silvery light. He gave Molly a little squeeze. “Gotta be optimistic.”

“Like the agents who were guarding Sara Jane and me? Look where their optimism got them. They’re dead.”

Matt sat down on the concrete bench that circled the fountain and drew her down beside him. “Okay, what’s bothering you, Molly?”

“Someone wanted Parker to kill you. He refused, but the next guy who takes his place won’t. I know you have to go back to the ranch, but I’m afraid for you.”

His pulse beat a deafening roar in his ears. “I haven’t decided about going back, yet.”

She glanced up at him but said nothing. They sat listening to the quiet splash of the fountain.

“You hired extra guards,” she said, breaking the silence. “We’re in danger here, too, aren’t we?”

The vow not to lie to her had come back to bite him. “If Ramon is one of Del Fuego’s men, then the crime boss knows where you are.” He couldn’t spell it out any plainer than that.

Molly rubbed her arms. “I’ve felt so safe here, but perhaps no place is safe.”

“Until you told me about Ramon, I thought—” There was no point in discussing the past. Matt put his arm around her shoulder. “Don’t worry. I’ll find a safe place. We just need a little more time. If we’re right about what’s on the microchips, we can round up Del Fuego and his men. Then—” But Matt didn’t want to promise anything until he was sure he could deliver it. “You said you had something to tell me.”

“Memories are beginning to fall into place.” Her words were velvety soft, fluid and as husky as a lover’s whisper in the darkness. “I remember making love with you.” She lowered her gaze to her hands in her lap. “That I loved you.” Her voice broke. “And how much it hurt when you left me.”

His heart thudded so hard he thought it might burst out of his chest—she remembered them together. It was what he wanted, prayed for. “Can you forgive me?”

He was encouraged that she didn’t shrug his arm from around her shoulders. He waited. She was trembling. “I never wanted to hurt you,” he said when she didn’t speak. “I had no



choice. I tried to get assigned to protect you, but—” His explanation sounded so feeble he couldn’t continue.

She didn’t look at him. She turned in his arms and stirred the pooling fountain waters with the tips of her fingers. “You’re assigned to protect me now. Still, you’re going to leave me. I know that.”

He didn’t know it. But until he could weigh all the pros and cons . . . Damn. He wanted to give her a safe, worry-free world, but all he could give her was his love and uncertainty. “I was going to wait, but maybe if I give this to you now. . .”

He withdrew the slim jewelry box from his pocket and handed it to her.

Her eyes widened. “For me?”

Matt watched her pulse throb in the delicate hollow of her neck. He longed to trace it with his fingertip, with his lips. He remained motionless, waiting to see her reaction to the gift.

She opened the box, withdrew the gold heart-shaped locket, and held it up to the light of the dancing waters.

“A reminder that you have my heart.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said. “When did you get this?” Her lips were moist, inviting.

“I bought it in Mitchell’s Corner before—” His throat went dry. He didn’t want to think about Parker’s death right now. Right now, he wanted to thread his fingers into the fiery tangles of her thick auburn hair and kiss those tempting lips. But his brother’s murder pushed at the edges of his mind, torturing him.

Without warning, Molly threw her arms around his neck with such exuberant joy that she knocked him off balance. His Stetson went flying, and he felt himself falling, Molly going with him. He couldn’t stop the momentum. They slipped over the edge of the fountain and hit the water with a tremendous splash. She let out a yelp. He stiffened, expecting the water to be cold, but it was tepid, and he relaxed into the backward roll that took them beneath the surface.

They came up coughing and sputtering. Then, she was laughing. “Matt, I’m so sorry!” She still clung to the necklace.

Her sopping purple shirt molded to her torso, and the nipples of her high-tipped breasts budded to life. White-hot desire shot through him. Silence fell between them. He moved closer, backing her up against the solid curve of the fountain. For a moment, they just looked at each other, and then everything inside him stilled to a healing calm. He pressed closer, and her wet top squished against his soaked shirt. With great care, she placed the necklace on the ledge, then her hands slid up his chest and over his shoulders. Her fingers tunneled into the hair at his nape, drawing him closer.

Matt yearned to peel her shirt away, to see the whiteness of her skin, to feel its softness. His fingers traced the base of her throat. She waited, motionless. Emerald waters splashed and bubbled around them.

He kissed the corner of her lips, traced the outline of them with feathery touches, then parted them with a strong thrust of his tongue. He sank into the familiar honeyed moisture of her mouth. His loins throbbed. One taste of her brought back all that they had been to each other and blended with all that he wanted them to be in the future. Impatience hummed through him like currents through a high frequency wire. He deepened the kiss, unable to get enough of her. She corralled him with her legs. They were hurtling toward a point of no return. Vaguely, he heard laughter, but he was too far gone to care.

Molly tried to shove him away, fighting to catch her breath.

“Don’t push me away, Molly.”

“Matt! Someone’s coming.”

Then it hit him. They were in a well-lit fountain in full view of anyone who might look out the window of the house and of anyone who might wander by.

“Can we join the pool party?” Suzy called, her voice full of laughter. Her hips, molded by cut-off shorts, swayed flirtatiously. She dropped Roberto’s hand and picked up Matt’s Stetson from the dirt. She dusted it off on her bare thighs, then perched it on her head with a playful tilt. “If I pulled something like this, Dad would ground me for six months.”

Matt groaned. As if exposing Molly to embarrassment wasn’t bad enough, he’d just set a very bad example for a couple of impressionable teenagers. *Nice move, cowboy.*

## Chapter Nine

Suzy and Roberto took Matt and Molly through the mudroom entrance of the ranch house and brought them towels and white terry cloth robes.

“Thanks,” Molly said with genuine gratitude. She wasn’t comfortable about changing in a room where others could enter at any time, but she didn’t want to drip water through the house, either.

Suzy removed Matt’s hat from her head and sailed it toward him. When it landed squarely atop his wavy crown of damp hair, she winked saucily. “Y’all behave yourselves now, ya hear?”

Roberto blushed and trailed after Suzy as she headed for the kitchen, her peals of laughter ringing long after she’d gone.

Matt grinned and settled his Stetson more firmly on his head. “That boy is in for a wild bronco ride with that filly.”

Molly dried her hair with one of the big white towels and smiled. “When I dumped you into the fountain, I’ll bet you felt you got a pretty wild ride yourself.”

“My feelings about you were fixed long before the dip in the fountain, little darlin’.”

“I’m not even going to open that chute.” She had other concerns. She had to get changed in this cramped space with a man she’d kissed with passionate abandon only minutes ago. If they saw each other nude, they would start necking again *and* . . .

She removed the necklace from the pocket of her soaked shirt. She debated putting on her new treasure. *No. Not a good idea. It might get tangled in my wet hair.* She slipped the jewelry into the pocket of the robe.

To protect herself from her still high-tilt passion, she wanted to ask him to step outside. But having him wait outside in the dark until she got changed wasn’t a good way to convince people they were married.

Matt turned away. “I won’t look. And you better not either, or you won’t be able to keep your hands off me.”

Molly shook her head and laughed. “Conceited devil!” Of course, he had good cause for his arrogance, judging by how he looked in the plastered-to-the-body fit of his wet shirt and soaked jeans.

“Not conceited—practical. Next time we get in a lip-lock, I want privacy.”

“Lip-lock? Your romantic words make me swoon.” *Next time* rang in her head. She turned away, warm tingles dancing over her skin.

The hiss of wet cloth separating from moist bodies snaked through the silence. Matt's belt buckle hit the floor with a metallic *thud*.

*Oh, God. Hurry. Hurry.* Trembling, Molly shrugged out of her bra and into the robe. She stepped out of the white cotton bikini panties now dangling around her ankles and used her big toe to tuck them under her other garments. No doubt Matt was nude by now, his clothes in a heap in front of him. She counted to ten to keep from turning to verify her assumption.

"Okay to turn around now?"

She cinched her terry belt tight. "Anytime."

They both turned. She laughed. "You're wearing your Stetson with the robe? Powerful fashion statement, cowboy."

The plunging vee of his terry robe revealed a sparse snarl of inky hair over a well-muscled chest. He slid his hand over the exposed skin. "Security thing. I may be naked under this robe, but a cowboy never feels naked with his hat on."

A picture she was sure he hadn't intended popped into her mind—Matt naked as Michelangelo's David and wearing only that big black Stetson. Heat climbed up her cheeks. Or maybe the image was exactly what he intended. She wouldn't put it past him. Darn him. By the time she figured out his game, it would be over.

They gathered their sopping clothing from the floor, and Matt wrung the shirts and jeans out over the deep stainless steel sink.

When he came to her bra and panties at the bottom of the pile, he dangled them before her. "Bet you look great in these."

She grabbed them from his hands. "That's for me to know and you to find out!" she replied, borrowing some of Suzy's sexy, playful sauciness. She marched outside into the moonlight to hang them on the clothesline.

He flipped on the porch light and followed with the rest of the clothing. "Never thought hanging up wet clothes could be so much fun."

She laughed. "You really need to get out more."

Before they headed upstairs, they aligned their boots on the porch. Tomorrow morning, the hot wind and Texas sun would begin the drying process.

"Hey, little darlin'. Don't our boots look nice 'n' cozy sittin' there side by side?"

She was thinking the same thing. She took off through the foyer into the living room ahead of him so he wouldn't see her smile. He caught up with her by the time she headed up the wide stairway. The mesquite wood steps felt cool under her bare feet, but nothing could cool her desire.

They exchanged glances and laughed, neither certain what the other was thinking.

When they entered their dimly lit suite, Tita gave them a once-over but said nothing about their robes. She tucked a bookmark between the pages of her novel and rose from the overstuffed lounge chair. “The little angel is changed and had a bottle, Señora. She’s already asleep.”

Molly smiled. It felt good to have the Señora status again. She thanked Tita for babysitting, and when the door closed, she whispered, “I hope you’re paying her enough, Matt. That woman is a treasure.” Molly unwrapped the towel from her head and used it to fluff her damp hair. “Speaking of money, is the FBI picking up my expenses, or are you running a tab that I’ll have to settle up later?”

Matt made a beeline for the crib. He looked down at Sara Jane with tremendous love in his eyes. He kissed the tip of his finger and touched it to the sleeping baby’s cheek. “Most everything is courtesy of the U.S. Government.” His tone was husky, barely above a whisper. “You’re a mighty important witness.” He sauntered toward her with a dangerous gleam in his eyes that looked promising.

She withdrew the necklace from her pocket and dangled it in front of his eyes. “Was this from the government, too?”

“Nope. Strictly from me.”

She knew that but loved teasing him. “Then I’ll accept it. Will you put it on for me?” Memories of hot kisses in the fountain sent a wave of heat to her core. Like a pyromaniac with one match and a whole can of lighter fluid, she wanted to see if she could ignite a bigger and better flame.

“My pleasure.” His low voice rumbled with sensuality. Ever so slowly, he withdrew the delicate chain from her fingers, the cool gold links slipping away with her breath. He moved behind her. “Lift your hair.”

With both hands, she lifted the damp tresses out of the way. His breath was warm on her neck as he brought the necklace around. The silence in the room thundered against the walls and boomeranged back. Molly closed her eyes. When the locket came to rest in the valley between her breasts, Matt’s callused fingers fumbled at the nape of her neck, then the chain took form and he fastened the clasp.

“Thank y—” Her breath caught and her throat constricted as Matt kissed her nape with warm, moist lips. Before she could recover, he rained kisses along the side of her neck and nibbled an ear lobe. Her skin came alive with shivery tingles, and her knees lost substance. She leaned into him. His upper torso pressed against her back, and the smell of chlorine mingled with the scent of his leathery soap and teased her senses.

His hands slipped from her shoulders, down her sides, while he caressed her curves before his arms wrapped around her. He stilled and just held her crushed tight against the hard

length of his body. Heat rippled between them, the warm night air flowing through the open window unequal to the task of cooling their fire.

Soft music from another part of the house drifted in. Matt turned Molly to him and touched her face. She pressed her lips into his hand. “I remember the last time we were together,” she said, surprised that the memory came with such ease. The same song had been playing that night. “We went up to the roof garden of the Adolphus Hotel and made love under the stars.”

“That wasn’t the last time.”

The news didn’t register because an old wound had suddenly split wide open. She tried to ignore the pain, but it was too great. She glared up at him. “The next morning you told me you couldn’t go with me into the witness program. Then . . . you were gone.”

She started to twist away, but he held her fast. “Darlin’, I want to give you promises—to make up for that other time—but I don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow.” His voice broke, then he touched the necklace. “But you have my heart. And tonight we have each other.”

His face was a collage of emotions—love, pain, hope, regret. She touched the fine lines at the corners of his eyes. In spite of all he’d suffered in the last few hours he’d used his steely control to set aside his pain to allow them this interlude they both so desperately needed.

She closed her hand over his, still resting on the little golden heart, and the bond between them rose like a phoenix from the ashes of her lost memory, stronger than ever before. Because of all they’d shared in the last forty-eight hours they now had mutual trust. Regardless of what happened tomorrow, no one could steal that trust, or her love for him. All resistance fell away, and she slid her arms up, let her fingers glide over his biceps, around his neck. “Tonight we have each other,” she said, repeating his words.

“Oh, Molly.”

He moaned. He covered her mouth with his. The kiss was tentative at first. *Oh, God.* She remembered how it had been between them—the love, the fire—and she wanted it again. She drew him closer.

Their tongues met, explored. The fever of their melded bodies burned through layers of terry cloth, heat seeking heat. He backed her against the wall.

He tugged at the knot on her belt. It gave, and the warmth of his hand closed around her breast. She gasped and her eyelids drifted shut. His soft, damp hair brushed her skin as he traced kisses downward to her nipples, sucking one and then the other.

“Don’t want to neglect either of these beauties,” he said with a huskiness that drove her wild.

She laughed within, and shivered with desire. The delicious sensations made her limbs weak. She explored the hardness and width of his chest, seeking solidarity with flesh and spirit. He glanced toward the king-size bed. "I'll bet that's more comfortable than my puny daybed."

"It's a place to start," she said, a little breathless. "But narrow beds can be good, too, as I recall."

"God, you do remember." His eyes glistened like she'd given him a great gift. "What a night that was. But tonight will be even better."

Together, they stumbled into the darkest part of the room. Shadows played with shadows on the wall, on the ceiling. Matt yanked away the spread, and they climbed onto the sheet, meeting in the center on their knees. With seeking hands, they slid away the open robes, faced each other with no lies. No promises.

She traced the sinewy muscles of his arms, and they closed around her. Then, in the same way she had toppled him into the fountain, he toppled her onto the bed. They both laughed. He threaded her damp hair through his fingers. "Turn about is fair play, right?"

A clever answer wouldn't come. All that came out was, "Matt, I love you."

He grinned. "The feelin' is mutual, little darlin'," he said with an exaggerated drawl. He kissed her cheeks, her eyelids, and the corners of her mouth. Then, he captured her lips and gave her such a tender kiss that it brought tears to her eyes. His mouth tasted of coffee. She pulled him closer.

His hand slid up her thigh, leaving a trail of flames; he approached within an inch of her quivering, moist center, then backed off and repositioned himself. Every gesture, every touch, every tingling sensation, was familiar to her—like coming home.

Memories engulfed her. Her head spun. Fighting sensory overload, she rose on her elbows to follow him, but he shook his head. She forced herself to lie back and wait for the new delights he had in mind.

Beyond anything Cinderella's prince might have fulfilled, Matt took Molly's foot in his warm hands and stroked the arch, the instep, then his hands slid up the back curve of her leg, passing the underside of her knee, then circled to the front of her thigh and inched upward again. She opened her legs to accept his touch.

Molly gasped. He was doing the most exquisite things to her. Rivulets of desire became flash-flood torrents, growing in speed and intensity. She tried, despite her growing mindlessness, to give him pleasure in return.

"Not yet, little darlin'," he murmured. "This is no eight second ride. We have all night."

To prove his point, he took her right to the peak and let her shimmer on the glittering edge. She dug her nails into his shoulders. "I don't think I can take much more without shattering."

“Try,” he whispered and began to stroke her again, slow and easy at first, then faster. All thoughts blanked out, and she arched into his hand and clung to him, almost there. Almost—then he backed off, proving he was in control.

“Matt!” She wanted to shake him. “You’ll pay for this.”

He laughed and kissed her, his massaging excruciatingly unhurried. “I look forward to it,” he said. “I remember how you made me pay the last time we were together like this.” He froze. “Oh God, Molly, just thinking about how you—”

Abruptly he slipped inside her. She constricted around him, smiling to herself. The control had equalized. Hot, slippery, rapid friction made her mindless again, and she closed her eyes and rode the soaring wave of passion. Stars exploded across the backs of her eyelids. Matt clung to her and flew in the same arc, as if they were two fiery meteorites shooting through the heavens. “I love you.” He rained kisses over her face.

It was a few seconds before she could catch her breath enough to answer. Then, she murmured, “This is just how I remembered our lovemaking—only better.”

“The power of old memories can sure derail a man,” he said, shaking his head. “I intended to stretch the pleasure, linger on the rise a while longer.”

She smiled. “Like you said, we have all night. And guess what, cowboy—I’m in charge of the next event.”

He settled down comfortably beside her. “Sounds great . . . but let’s not rush it. I remember how much you used to like to cuddle, too.”

“Mm, I still do,” she replied, snuggling against him. She traced a long white scar in the middle of his chest. “Did you get this riding the rodeo circuit?”

He looked disappointed, so she figured it was a scar she should have remembered. “That and a dozen more,” he said. “On my legs, my back. Each one has a story, but you’ve heard them all before.”

“Then soon, I’ll remember them all. In the meantime, I plan to check out each and every one. Tonight.” She grinned. “And refamiliarize myself with the complete package known as Matt Ryan.”

He grinned and touched his penis. “I don’t think I ever told you about this scar.”

She laughed and swatted his chest. “I’ll definitely check that one out, too.”

Molly tucked her head into his shoulder and kissed his neck. She smiled. Memories were coming back faster, and their return made her feel more in control. It surprised her that she liked to be in control as much as Matt did, and in a little while, she would take the reins and give this cowboy a night to remember. She had to make the most of their time together



because tomorrow he might leave her, and the love and passion they shared might never come again. And that was too heartbreaking to think about.

\* \* \* \*

Matt awoke with Molly in his arms; her hair spilled out over his shoulder. He kissed her forehead. Last night she'd given him a wild tumble into bliss. She may have forgotten some things, but how to make love wasn't one of them. He grinned down at her. She seemed to derive great satisfaction from calling the shots. Funny—with Molly, he didn't mind sharing control.

He watched her for a while, then eased away, slipped on his robe, and headed for the bathroom. After he washed up, he opened the window and looked out. Suzy's older brother, Davy, was heading toward the arena.

Matt's gut tightened. He'd lost his big brother, and his life would never be the same again. Damn it, he felt like he'd charged out of the chute without hold-straps to cling to, and he was spinning, powerless. He rubbed his eyes. God, he was tired. First, Molly had gotten up with Sara Jane, and then he had taken a turn. But Sara Jane waking up several times during the night had not kept him from getting enough sleep. He had to make a decision about returning to the ranch. If he did return, he'd need to find a safe place to leave Molly and Sara Jane for the time being. Unfortunately, nowhere was completely safe. Not until Del Fuego was put away for good.

What was he going to do? He couldn't ignore his responsibilities. Parker's killer had to be found, and Luke needed protection and support. Then, there was Parker's burial . . . and informing his parents of the death of their eldest son . . .

Matt returned to the bedroom and slipped back into bed. He drew Molly back into his arms, where she belonged. Where he belonged.

She stirred, and after a moment, her eyes blinked open. "Hi," she said, looking like an angel. He kissed her eyelids, the tip of her nose, and then her lips. She and the baby had become his world, and everything else he held dear came in a sad second.

"Sleep well?"

Her eyes glittered. "Never better." She smoothed the lines at the outside corners of his eyes. "But you look worried."

"I have to tell you something," he said and took a deep breath. "In addition to all the other illegal operations, I think Del Fuego is dealing in black-market babies."

"Dear God!" Molly rolled away from Matt and grabbed her robe. "This isn't just about me and my baby. It's about a world of women and their babies." She got up and began to pace, her eyes wild. "I knew Del Fuego was evil, but he's . . . he's the devil himself . . . the very worst of human nature." She buried her face in her hands, her whole body trembling.

Matt sat up on the side of the bed and rubbed his throbbing head. He wished he could have kept this to himself, but she needed to know. “And you’re the woman who can get him off the streets. He has to be stopped, Molly.”

“I can face whatever danger there is for me, but I won’t gamble with Sara Jane’s life! I need someone reliable to guard us while you’re gone.”

“I keep thinking of those dead guards,” Matt said. “They were top men, yet Del Fuego took them down and kidnapped Sara Jane. If Del Fuego ever gets his hands on her again she might disappear for good.”

Molly closed her eyes. Matt shrugged into his robe and drew her into his arms. She was still trembling. He could smell a mingling of himself on her and her own natural musky scent. He reined in the urge to kiss her.

“We can’t let him get my baby!”

He heard the tremor in her words. “We won’t. I’ve decided not to go back to the ranch.”

“But Luke needs you. And there’s the funeral and you *must* go, Matt. You’ll regret it the rest of your life if you don’t. You’re that kind of man. I know.”

“I’ll live with it. Wherever Sara Jane is—wherever you are—is where I intend to be.”

“And have you resent me for the rest of our lives for making you choose between us and your family? No way.”

“That won’t happen.”

Molly twisted away from him and went to the window. He followed and wrapped his arms around her. They stood staring out. He doubted that she was taking in the beauty of the sun-kissed landscape any more than he was. The heat of her penetrated the terry cloth between them and stirred his desire again. “Come back to bed.” He’d made a decision, and he didn’t want to think any more about it.

Molly turned in his arms and faced him. “Wherever I am, that’s where you’ll be, right? Well, you’d better pack your bags, cowboy, because we’re going back to your ranch.”

“You’d go there, knowing the danger?”

She traced the V of his robe with graceful fingers. “You’ll work out the safety measures. You need to do this, and I love you too much to hold you back.”

“No wonder I love you. You’ve got guts.”

“Not guts . . . not with my baby. I trust you to take care of us.”

He'd never loved her more. She would do this thing she feared to save him from a lifetime of remorse. It was a tremendous sacrifice. "I'll see that you never regret this. I'll start by beefing up security at the ranch." It sounded too easy, and he hoped like hell that returning to the ranch wasn't a deadly mistake.

\* \* \* \*

Matt made a series of phone calls, setting his security plan into place, and by the time they landed at the ranch, armed vaqueros swarmed out like presidential secret service men to meet their plane.

"Who are these guys?" Molly hadn't expected anything like this. "And where did they come from?"

"My ranch hands and some vaqueros from other ranches. Everyone wanted to help. Buck sent some trusted men, too."

The security force had arrived in three air-conditioned semi-trucks and herded their little group, including Tita and Roberto into the center one.

Molly clung to Sara Jane, afraid the swarming men might frighten the baby. "Isn't this overkill?" she whispered to Matt.

He kissed Sara Jane's tiny fingers. "No such thing as too much protection for my little sunshine."

*His little sunshine.* "I know. But I gotta tell you, all this fuss is terrifying."

He gave her a squeeze. "Listen, you cared enough to come back here with me, and I don't want you to ever regret it."

She didn't want that either, and for her baby, she'd go along with the safety restrictions. The guards insisted that they remain inside the van until it pulled inside the truck shed. Then, surrounded by a tight shield of vaqueros, they walked the short distance to the house. Armed men crouched on the roofs of the barn, the house.

"Are these guys going to keep us company like this every time we leave the house?"

"You and Sara Jane must stay inside under guard until I comb the ranch. After I've swept the entire acreage, you can have a little more freedom."

Molly frowned. She'd expected guards, but not this. Matt had made her feel like a prisoner when she'd first arrived at the ranch, and now this . . .

The front door swung open and a tall, Florida-tanned, silver-haired couple in dressy western wear raced down the steps. The slender woman with an unlined face had thick hair done in a short chic style and sapphire eyes that seemed to miss nothing. The well-built man, who

looked like a cross between Matt and Anthony Quinn, had dark circles under bloodshot eyes.

Molly had known Matt's parents would be here for Parker's funeral, but seeing them charging out of the house unnerved her. She exchanged glances with Tita. "Victoria and Gavin Ryan," Tita whispered, reminding her of their names.

The Ryans fell into Matt's arms. "Oh, Matt," his mom cried. "We were afraid . . . Luke didn't know when you were coming . . . if you were coming. Then you called, praise God."

Matt held his parents for a long moment. "Mom, Dad, I'm so sorry. How are you holding up?"

Victoria clutched her handkerchief. "We're all cried out and ready to face what has to be done."

Gavin swallowed. "The man who did this must pay!"

Matt nodded. Silence hung in the air like an echo from a thunderclap. Matt shifted his weight, then drew Molly and Sara Jane forward. "This is Molly and—"

Victoria opened her arms and hugged Molly. "Luke told me. This is your wife and baby. Welcome to the family, dear. Matt's explanation of why he kept this precious grandchild a secret from us had better be good." She lifted the baby from Molly's arms.

Heat crawled up Molly's cheeks and she opened her mouth, but no words came out. The lie had mushroomed to hurt more people.

Gavin hugged Molly tight to his broad chest and held on fiercely. She felt his tense hold had little to do with her; he was still reeling from his loss, and his sorrow seeped into her pores like acid. "Luke didn't exaggerate when he said you were beautiful. Welcome, Molly, welcome."

"Let's get inside." Matt's voice was gruff with emotion as he herded them toward the house.

With Tita on one side and Roberto on the other, Molly followed, looking at the ground and wishing it would swallow her.

Tita squeezed her arm. "Don't feel guilty, Señora," she whispered. "It is not you who lied about being married."

The guards stopped at the door and took up their posts. Inside the house, late afternoon sun poured through the arched windows and threw shadows on the wall, the dark images seeming to mock the lie. Matt had to clear this up right away, or she would.

"I hope you're hungry." Matt's mom led them into the dining room. "I prepared enough for an army. Good thing I did, huh? At least it . . . it kept me busy . . ." Molly's heart ached for the poor mother who had just lost her eldest son.

The table had been set for eight people with the baby's high chair pulled up at a corner. Steam rose from large covered bowls. Aromas of peppers and cooked meat filled the air, along with something made of chocolate. Luke came out of the kitchen carrying a platter loaded with ribs. He almost dropped the platter onto the table, he was in such a rush to hug Matt. "Thank God you're here. The attorney got me out on bail. But it's not looking too good."

"Your brother will fix it, won't you, Matt?" His father darted a sharp look at Matt. "You won't fail us and let something happen to Luke, too. Will you, son?"

The accusation and warning in the elder man's words were unmistakable—and so unfair. "Parker's death wasn't Matt's fault," Molly said. "It was—"

"Please," Matt's mother interrupted. "Can't we talk about all of this after dinner?" Her face was rigid, and she fluttered her lashes.

"No, Mom," Matt said. "We need to clear some things up right now." He motioned for everyone to sit down, and took Sara Jane from his mother's arms and put the baby into the high chair. "First, you all must take a vow of secrecy."

They all knew that Matt was an FBI agent; they knew his request was not frivolous.

Murmurs of agreement hummed through the group, and they took seats around the big dining room table. Everyone stared at Matt and waited. Molly could barely breathe.

"Number one, Molly's not my wife. At least not yet. And while I wish Sara Jane was my child, she's not. But they're both very dear to me."

Matt's words swirled in Molly's head . . . *not yet* . . . *not my child* . . . *both dear to me*. It was an explanation, not a commitment. Regardless of the implied promise, he'd never actually promised her anything. Molly bit her lip and fidgeted with her hands in her lap. She could clear up the misconception about Matt's blame in all this, if people would just let her talk.

Parker's death was her fault. She'd led Webb and Paulo to the ranch with her phone call. She wouldn't mention, of course, that if Matt had told her the truth from the beginning she wouldn't have made the call. But better they hate her than feel Matt had failed them. He didn't deserve their criticism. God, she'd never seen anyone try harder to take care of everyone.

Matt explained about the danger and the high security then said, "I've made it as safe here as humanly possible, but I need everyone's cooperation to make the system work." He faced his dad. "It breaks my heart that Parker was murdered, and I'll do all I can to clear Luke and bring Parker's killer to justice, but I'll be damned if I'll take the blame for his death."

"I told Dad about Lone Star Retreat," Luke said. "He knows Parker's murder isn't your fault."

The old man pounded the table with the flat of his hand. "Since when do you speak for me, Luke?" He glared at him a moment, then turned his ire toward Matt. "You're in charge. I expected—"

Matt's mother covered her husband's hand. "Don't get excited, dear. You know what the doctor said."

Matt closed his eyes for a moment, as though he'd just remembered his father's heart trouble. "Mom's right," he said in a tight voice. "Let's eat, then the two of us can talk in private."

The old man gave a slight bow of his head. "I'm sorry, my dear, I forgot my manners."

Molly forced a tight smile. "Matt's been carrying a tremendous burden single-handedly for a long time, and doing his very best to take care of everyone at a great sacrifice to himself and his own dreams. I hope you all appreciate that."

Faces around the table paled. No one dared breathe. The silence pounded against Molly's eardrums. She didn't care. The old codger needed to know what a fine son he had.

Matt's father's face flushed, and his gaze burned into hers. He reminded her of a bull, pawing the earth before the charge. Then he shook his head. "You ought to marry this girl, Matt. She's got fire. And guts."

\* \* \* \*

The cheerful morning brightness was a sharp contrast to the dark cloud of sorrow hanging over the Ryan ranch. Leading the procession, Matt inched his shiny red truck along at a snail's pace through the compound. From buildings, windmills, and fences, guards watched. They removed their hats while the funeral procession passed. Behind Matt, his dad followed in a black Cadillac accompanied by Matt's mom and Luke.

Matt glanced in the rearview mirror several times. Beside him, Molly turned and glanced through the rear window into the bed of their truck. The mahogany box, covered with dozens of white carnations, hadn't budged. "Parker's casket is fine," she said past the lump in her throat.

"I know," Matt said, his jaw tight. "I was trying to get a glimpse of Dad. He seemed a little flushed earlier."

If the old man wasn't always in such a stew, maybe his health would be better and he could run the damned ranch himself, Molly thought. She reached past the baby strapped in her car seat between them and touched Matt's arm. "Luke's with your parents. He'll watch out for your dad."

"Yeah," Matt said without conviction.

Molly rubbed her arms and looked out the window. When the dirt road curved, she could see the full extent of their long procession—a cavalcade fit for a king. Matt had performed a miracle by pulling things together so quickly, so expertly.

A slow procession of ten solemn riders, on horses decorated with garlands of bluebonnets, followed his parents' Cadillac. Riding tall in silver-trimmed saddles, the horsemen were decked out in dark western suits and shiny tooled boots. Behind the horses, twelve men marched on foot, strumming sad guitars, trailed by three drummers beating a mournful cadence. Alfonso, Tita and Roberto followed them in a ranch truck. Twenty mounted vaqueros armed with rifles brought up the rear.

The procession ended at a family graveyard on a small rise of land about a mile from Matt's house. Hundreds of bluebonnets decorated gates and arches. A small wooden stage had been erected and covered with a tent. Family, friends, and ranch hands filed into the rows of wooden benches set up in front of the stage. Women with mantillas of black lace covering their heads clutched rosaries and crossed themselves. A crowd of vaqueros stood at the back, hats in hand.

There were at least a hundred people there. Tita and Roberto took a seat beside Molly. In a whisper, Tita pointed out Parker's pretty blonde wife and three stairstep sons. "Even though Parker and Bev's divorce is almost final," Tita said, "Señor Matt will take care of those boys now like his own. He's a good uncle. He's already set up a college fund for them."

Molly nodded. She wasn't surprised. Matt was a caring man. Where were Bev and her children staying? And why wasn't it at Matt's house? She'd ask Tita later.

A Roman Catholic priest led the rosary. Later, those who wanted to speak came to the microphone. Vaqueros who had known Parker since he was a boy related poignant stories in a mixture of English and Spanish. One that touched Molly was a story about Parker at age ten when he'd climbed old windmill Carlita, certain he could fly. The vaquero ended his tale in a choked voice. "Now finally you can fly," he said, "with the angels."

Matt was the last to speak. He walked across the stage, his footfalls uneven, heavy, as though every step was an effort, pounding the unpainted wood planks with a hollow thud. He stood tall in front of the microphone. Sadness darkened his eyes, and he cleared his throat.

"Parker had strengths," Matt said, "and weaknesses like all of us. He died because he refused to lift a hand against a brother. His murder will not go unpunished." Matt lifted a powerful arm, fist closed. "Ride bolts of lightning in the night skies, big brother . . ." Matt's voice broke. His wide shoulders trembled. After a moment, he swallowed, inhaled, then said, "Stay for the eight- count, *mi hijo*."

Tears welled up in Molly's eyes. She longed to race up onto the stage and hug Matt, to comfort him, but she held herself in check and waited until he joined her on the bench. Looking straight ahead, Molly slid her hand into Matt's and held tight.

The priest raised his arms and everyone stood. While Parker's casket was lowered into the ground with a slow drumbeat, a shadow fell across the grave, and Molly looked up into Ramon's icy stare.



## Chapter Ten

Stepping in front of Molly and the baby, Matt glared at Ramon. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Ramon gestured with his head. “Ask them.”

Edward Noble and Gordon Phillips, the FBI agents he’d sent to check on detective Arnie Kenner, gave stiff, index-finger salutes outward from their eyebrows. Both men had similar blend-into-the-crowd looks—dark hair, medium height with wiry builds. Matt had always thought they resembled each other enough to be brothers, or clones.

“What’s going on?”

We need to talk,” Noble said. “In private.”

Matt’s jaw tightened. He was in charge of the Del Fuego case, and he hadn’t called this meeting. Damn them, invading his ranch, disrupting his last moments with Parker. His sense of duty kept him from telling them all to go to hell. Instead, he gave a terse nod, then stepped away and asked Molly to go with his parents to the tent where food and drinks waited for those who’d come to pay their last respects. “I’ll be along shortly,” he promised, and gave her arm a squeeze.

Molly hugged her baby close, protectively. “I don’t want Ramon here.”

“I have to hear him out.”

Her eyes flashed. “Who are those other men?”

“FBI agents. I’ll fill you in later, I promise. Now go.”

She narrowed her eyes and glared at him. “Did you invite them here?”

“Hell no. Have some faith in me, will you?” He knew what she was thinking—that he was going to hand her over to them.

Whipping through the tent, a hot breeze kicked up dust and spun mesquite leaves between them. Matt could have cut the hostile silence with a knife.

A pain throbbed in his head. “Come on, Molly. Don’t give me trouble now.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Later, then.” Her tone guaranteed it wasn’t a question. It was a promise.

He shook his head. Another time he might have laughed. He’d walked right into that one. That’s what came from dealing with a clever woman. “Just . . . trust me. Please.”

She hesitated, then spun away. Matt watched her to be sure she didn't return. She walked between Victoria and Gavin to their Cadillac. They had asked her what was going on, but he hadn't heard her answer.

Luke had been watching from a distance, out of earshot. He came up to Matt with a worried look on his face. "Is something wrong?"

"Everything's under control."

"Yeah? That's what Parker said just before he walked off with Webb Viceman. Take care of yourself, bro."

Matt nodded and patted Luke on the shoulder. Luke turned and jogged to his parents' Cadillac. He paused, looked back, and gave Matt a long, meaningful look before he got into the back seat of the car with Molly and the baby.

Matt sighed. Was Luke that worried about him? Or just upset because he wasn't in on things?

Matt drew himself up to his full height and, with his gut clenched tight in apprehension, walked out about ten yards across dry, rutting earth near a group of gnarled gum trees, faced the men. "How the hell did you get on the ranch without my security force stopping you?"

"Chopper." Noble fumbled in the pocket of his beige western shirt and withdrew a pack of cigarettes. "Ramon showed us where we could land undetected." Noble paused and lit a cigarette. He squinted as smoke curled into his eyes. "The rest was easy. Dressed like your vaqueros, we blended right in."

Damn. Matt had told his men to watch for choppers, planes, and strangers. "Which sector?"

"Northeast corner of the west sector," Noble said.

The guys in that section weren't doing their jobs, and there would be hell to pay. "Okay. What gives?"

Noble blew out a puff of smoke. "Before we get to that, you need to know that Ramon's one of us."

Matt shook his head and glared at his former vaquero. "You're FBI?"

Ramon nodded and looked down at his boots. Matt frowned. He'd treated the man like a friend, a confidant.

"The call Molly overheard was to me," Noble said.

Adrenaline shot through Matt's veins. "You bastards. You had Ramon watching me. Why?"

Noble took a final pull off his cigarette then dropped it and crushed it with the heel of his boot. "Headquarters wants to be sure your relationship with the woman hasn't become a problem."

Matt flinched. "It hasn't. So you can get your asses off my land." He picked up a stone and threw it at a boulder about fifty feet away, pretending it was his FBI chief's head. He nodded in sober satisfaction when the rock hit the boulder dead center.

"We're taking Molly with us," Noble said.

"The hell you are!"

"This isn't up for negotiation. Del Fuego knows she's here and will order a hit. He may contact some of your men, find a weak link, then hire the spineless SOB to do his dirty work."

Matt leveled a look at Noble. "Maybe Ramon is the weak link. And I'll be glad say it to the Judas's face."

Noble pulled two folded sheets of paper from his shirt pocket and handed them to Matt. "We knew you'd be a hard sell."

Matt scanned Ramon's dossier, then glanced at him. "Okay. I'm impressed. But make him stay away from Molly and her baby. He's spooked her."

"She has more to be spooked about than Ramon," Noble said. "Her detective friend Arnie Kenner was found in an abandoned warehouse with his throat slit from ear to ear. He'd been tortured first, so you can bet that whatever he knew, Del Fuego knows by now."

Gordon Phillips, a somewhat tightlipped man, had let Noble do all the talking to this point and Matt was surprised when he piped up. "But we aren't just the bearers of bad news," he said. "We heard from the lab."

A prick of resentment stiffened the hairs on the back of Matt's neck. He had asked that lab technician to call him personally if they succeeded in extracting the data embedded in the coins. "And?"

"It's Del Fuego's books, all right," Phillips said. "We have everything we need to turn up the heat on him and his men. As we speak, SWAT is organizing a raid on his villa."

We? None of this would be possible without Molly. Phillips was talking like the Feds were the big heroes. "Until Del Fuego is in custody, Molly stays with me," Matt growled.

"We have our orders." He handed Matt a written directive with his chief's seal. "And now you have yours."

Matt cursed under his breath. Just because he was in semi-retired status, they thought they could pull his strings like he was a damned puppet. "I need time to explain this to Molly."

“There isn’t time. The clock’s ticking.”

“Make time. If Molly isn’t handled with sensitivity, she could drop back into her amnesia fog—maybe this time permanently. Remember, she was an eyewitness when Del Fuego killed a Fed in cold blood. You want to risk losing her testimony?”

\* \* \* \*

Molly fought anger and confusion at seeing Ramon on the ranch. To suppress her emotions, she clutched Luke’s arm. Under the shade of the tented area, mourners had gathered in little groups to share refreshments and express their grief. Luke introduced Molly to Parker’s wife, Beverly, and their children.

“I’m so sorry about Parker—” Molly searched for more to say, but nothing came to mind. Bev shed no tears, but her eyes were red-rimmed and empty looking. She carried her youngest son on one hip, and the other two clung to the skirt of her simple black dress. The boys appeared to be about a year apart in age. Molly guessed between two and four years old. Their sad brown eyes, big as quarters stared at her. She wanted to hug them close. How awful to lose their daddy—even a daddy who might not have always been there for them. Whatever their father’s faults had been, he was gone—taken from them forever. Molly’s heart clenched with mourning.

Luke led Molly away to meet other mourners. She found it difficult to do more than nod with the image of the children’s sorrowful eyes still fresh in her mind.

The hair on her nape rippled. She felt someone’s gaze boring into her back. She turned and met the stony glare of a young blonde woman with a toddler on her hip. Who was she—and why was that murderous look in her eyes? Molly was about to ask Luke about the woman when his father called him away.

Alone, and feeling like a cowgirl without a horse in this corral of strangers, Molly headed for Tita who stood by the punch bowl sipping something from a paper cup. Molly took a deep breath then asked, “Who’s that woman over there?”

“Which woman?” Tita asked.

“The pretty blonde.”

“Oh,” Tita said, “then you haven’t met Connie Lou?” Tita grabbed her arm. “Well, we’ll fix that.”

“No!” Molly said.

Tita dragged her right up to the young woman and introduced her. She recognized the name, Connie Lou. *Oh, God, this was Luke’s soon-to-be ex-spouse. Did the woman think—*

“Oh,” Connie Lou said. “You’re Matt’s wife?”

Molly nodded. The lie was growing. She hated it, but she had to lie to keep her baby safe.

Connie Lou's blue eyes grew wide. "Lemme get this straight. You ain't with Luke?"

"Heavens, no," Molly said. "We're in-laws. Nothing else."

Hostility drained from Connie Lou's expression, and she smiled. "Well, I'm right proud to meet you," she said, pumping Molly's arm. "Right proud. Alicia's eighteen months. How old's your little girl?"

"Almost four months." Molly smiled at Sara Jane and kissed her forehead.

While Molly and Connie Lou talked about babies and motherhood, Connie Lou kept glancing over at Luke, who was now deep in conversation with his father, Gavin. Gavin looked flushed, his eyes glassy. Matt had been so worried about him.

"Excuse me," Molly said. She handed Sara Jane to Tita and went for a glass of cold water for Gavin. When Molly returned, Connie Lou had left to talk to Bev. Tita and Victoria sat on folding chairs at the edge of the tented area, darting worried looks at Luke and Gavin who stood away from the crowd.

Father and son glared at each other and waved their arms. Molly hoped Luke wasn't upsetting the old man. Gavin Ryan was a grouch, but considering he'd just buried his son, she figured Luke should cut him some slack.

When she got within earshot, she slowed to let them finish their conversation before approaching.

"Instead of finding Parker's killer, Matt is fooling around with Molly," Gavin complained. "We have to get him back on track."

"You don't have to worry," Luke said. "Family always comes first with Matt. You know that." Luke's voice took on the self-important tone of a man who wanted to prove to his father that he was privy to secret information. "Matt brought Molly and the baby here as bait to catch Parker's killer."

Molly's pulse thundered in her ears. With trembling hands, she stepped forward and thrust the glass of water into Gavin's fingers. Then, she faced Luke. "Is that true?"

Luke paled and looked at his father, then back at Molly. "I didn't mean for you to hear that." He swallowed. "But don't worry. Matt has everything under control."

*Everything under control.* Matt thought he could control the situation—any situation. That was the reason for the extra heavy protection. But how could she even for one moment think he'd use her baby as bait? He loved Sara Jane, didn't he?

Molly closed her eyes. Dear, God. She'd come here of her own free will, knowing the danger, but wanting to give support to the man she loved.

Luke shifted his weight. His tanned skin had a greenish cast. "Look, I—" He paused. "I gotta go. I need some time by myself. It's been a helluva day." He took off through the crowd as if coyotes were nipping at his heels.

"He likes to go to the barn when he's upset," Gavin said.

Molly nodded. Fighting simmering anger, she pivoted, marched over to where Tita was seated, and lifted Sara Jane from the woman's arms. "I'm sorry, I have to leave. Now."

"What's wrong, Señora?"

Molly kept moving. Her throat was raw. "I'll explain later."

She strode from the shade of the tent in the direction of the ranch house, about a mile away. Thank goodness for her boots. She wouldn't have gotten very far in high heels. She shifted the weight of the baby in her arms.

Wait a minute. Why should she believe Luke? Because there was no reason for him to lie. Didn't the excess security prove something was up? "Bait, can you imagine?" she grumbled to Sara Jane. "He brought us here as bait."

Four guards immediately mounted their horses and followed Molly, clopping along behind her. She darted a glance at them. Sure, he'd hired enough security to keep her and the baby safe. But the plentiful protection didn't make up for being used.

She had to leave. But how? Slipping away from this many men wouldn't be easy. Besides, where would she go? Oh, God. She had to think this through, and not act rashly. What was best for Sara Jane?

Matt had told her that Del Fuego was into baby selling and she understood the concept of risking a few people for a safer world for the greater society. But damn Matt, he'd vowed to tell her the truth, the whole truth—and hiding his plan to use her baby for bait was a deadly betrayal.

Molly followed the dirt lane. Her arms ached from Sara Jane's weight, but she clutched her baby tighter to her breast. When she stomped past a gum tree, a flock of black birds took flight. She wished she, too, had wings to fly her baby to safety.

Horses' hooves clomped behind Molly. It struck her odd that her bodyguards rode horses while she walked with a baby in her arms across a mile or so of barren ground under a blazing Texas sun. Something was wrong with this picture. Well, she could fix that. Molly stopped, and a guard came alongside.

She looked up into the weathered face and forced a smile. "How about a ride?"

He grinned, showing crooked, tobacco-stained teeth with two gaping holes in the front, and nodded. Before he could dismount to help her get on, the sound of an engine stopped him. He and the other bodyguards reined their horses aside, clearing the road for the shiny red truck coming up on them fast, spewing a cloud of dust in its wake.

Matt skidded to a stop and jumped from the truck without turning off the motor. From his radio, a woman's twangy voice belted out a song about every day being a winding road. Molly's lips twisted into a smirk. How appropriate. Lately, the road of her life had been not only winding but also had been full of treacherous potholes.

"What the hell are you doing?" Matt grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around to face him. His eyes were as fierce as the Texas heat.

Molly's hold on her baby tightened, and she gritted her teeth. "Leave me alone."

"Are you crazy? Walking out here in this broiling temperature and exposing Sara Jane?"

She glared at him. "Isn't that what you wanted? To use us as bait?"

His eyes darkened. "Where'd you get such a lame-brained idea?"

"You should've told me what you were up to. I would risk my life for you—for society—but not my baby's life. Never my baby's life."

A muscle in his jaw twitched. "And you think I would?"

She leveled an icy stare at him, in the hope that the cold silence between them would give him an idea of the ice forming in her heart.

"Let's get the baby out of the sun." He gripped Molly's arm and drew her back toward the truck.

"You have me at a disadvantage because I have a baby in my arms, but I won't be intimidated, cowboy!"

"And God help anyone who'd try," he said with bitterness in his tone. He yanked open the door and helped her climb inside, then slid behind the wheel. His chiseled profile looked intense—like he wanted to jam the accelerator to the floorboard, yet he drove slow and careful. The guards kept pace on horseback.

Matt stopped the truck under the shade of a withered oak and turned to Molly. His eyes searched hers. "Okay, what happened?"

She fought the power of his gaze. "You've kept secrets from me from the moment you first brought me here. Even after you promised no more lies."

"What secrets?" He rested his arm on the back of the seat.

She glared at his hand inches from her shoulder and edged away. “Don’t play dumb. Luke told your father that you brought me here to be your bait.”

“I don’t know why he said such a damn fool thing. You must know it’s not true. It was your idea to return here with me. Not mine.”

“You made me love you, made me want to help you. Maybe it was all a trick. Part of a plan. You brought those FBI men here—” Molly shook her head. Nothing made sense. “And what about Ramon? You claimed you fired him. Then he shows up and you go off with him, all buddy-buddy.”

“Ramon is an FBI agent. The call you overheard was to headquarters. The Feds were watching me, making sure I wasn’t letting our past relationship get in the way of the present job.”

“Ha! I guess you assured them they have no worry in that respect. The job always comes first. Just like last time when you left me.”

Matt flinched as though she’d struck him. “That was then. This is now.” He drew her and the baby into his arms. “I love you, Molly. I love you! I love your baby. I’d never put either of you in jeopardy.”

She pulled back. “Then why did Luke say that stuff?”

“Why don’t we ask him?”

“Yes. Let’s.” She lifted her chin. “And there’s no time like the present. Your dad said he went to the barn.”

\* \* \* \*

Afternoon sun swept in through a window in the haymow, spilling onto a pile of fresh hay and sending more heat into a closed space that was already too hot. Matt carried Sara Jane in his arms and felt that she belonged there. At the moment, Molly couldn’t agree. Her stride beside him was quick and determined. The soft stomping of restive horses echoed through the barn. It was a sound Matt usually found comforting, but not now—not with his problems multiplying.

They found Luke outside the first stall. He’d changed out of his dark suit into faded jeans and worn boots and was currying his quarter horse, Rocket, talking to him in soft murmurs. When they got closer, the animal gave a loud neigh and Luke’s head shot up.

Matt glanced down at Molly. “Ask him.”

A flush crept up Luke’s neck. “Ask me what?”

Molly stroked Rocket’s nose, and when she spoke, her voice was as soft as brass knuckles in a velvet glove. “Did Matt tell you he brought me and my baby here as bait?”



“Ah . . . no., Luke said. “But Matt’s with the FBI, and they pull stunts like that all the time. And Dad was goin’ on half cocked, as usual, and I wanted to reassure him that Matt was on top of things. I was only tryin’ to help.”

Matt met his brother’s gaze with what he hoped was a hard look. “Or maybe you were tryin’ to impress Dad with your supposed inside knowledge.”

“Get off my case, Matt!”

Rocket stomped in place. Disturbed by the raised voices, he whinnied and bobbed his head. Sara Jane’s face scrunched up like she might cry. Horses and babies didn’t like shouting. Matt stroked the horse’s neck with one hand while angling Sara Jane out of the way and lowered his tone to a growl. “Not this time.”

“Don’t get yer britches twisted. I opened my mouth when I shoulda kept it shut, but what was the harm?”

“The harm was that you made Molly think I’d lied to her, planned to use her.” Matt fought the heat of rising anger. “That I didn’t love her.” His throat was dry, his words choked.

Luke’s face turned gray. “I—” He threw down the curry comb, and started for the door.

Molly stepped in front of him and put her hand on his arm. “Don’t bolt, Luke. Let’s talk this out, and try to make it better.”

“Right,” Matt said, calmed by Molly’s reasonable tone. “You messed up there, little brother. But I gotta say I’m mighty proud of how you’ve stayed sober these last few days. It shows a helluva lot of determination.”

Luke stood a little taller and faced Molly with sincere regret in his face. “I’m sorry, Molly. It seems drunk or sober, I’m always makin’ an ass of myself around you.”

“Yeah. Well, you’ll have to work on that. You can start by clearing up your lie to your dad.” She smiled, apparently to tease him into better humor. “With a little effort, I think you’ve got potential to be one of the top good guys.”

Luke puffed out his chest as though she’d just given him a gold bull-riding buckle. “I’m goin’ to try,” he said. “Really try hard. After Mom and Dad head back for Florida, I’m goin’ back to Lone Star to finish rehab. Coolin’ my heels overnight in jail made me realize what I want, deep down is—to make a certain lady respect me.”

Matt frowned remembering the night Luke had stumbled drunkenly into the kitchen and put his hands on Molly. Now his brother was looking at Molly as if he could eat her for dessert. Matt’s throat ached. He’d never been the jealous type—and no reason to start now, especially where his own brother was concerned. But he couldn’t stop his arm from slipping possessively around Molly’s waist.

\* \* \* \*

Ranch smells of hay and cattle wafted on the breeze as they crossed the complex toward the ranch house. Molly slipped her hand into Matt's. He hadn't betrayed her after all. Her face grew warm. "I'm sorry, Matt . . . sorry I was so quick to doubt you."

Matt shrugged. "You're still off-balance from a serious trauma. And with the threat of danger around every turn, doubt is understandable."

Beneath Matt's forgiving words, she heard a tightness in his voice that troubled her. "Is there something else I should know?"

"You were great with Luke," Matt said, ignoring her question and changing the subject. "I was ready to tear into him, but your soothing voice of sanity made me see that my anger wasn't what the boy needed right now."

"Luke's younger than you, but hardly a boy," she said. "Maybe if everyone treated him like a man—"

"He has to earn that."

"Give him a break. Owning up to what he did and staying sober shows he's trying, at least. With all that's happened, he could've buried his pain in alcohol." An instant later, she regretted her words, because they conjured up the memory of Matt's own recent battle with temptation when he'd learned of Parker's death and contemplated finding solace in the promised oblivion of a quart of bourbon.

Something flickered in Matt's eyes, and then it was gone. He cradled the baby in one arm, wrapped the other around Molly's shoulder, and gave her a little hug. "You're right. I understood Luke and even myself better in those few moments in the barn. Thanks, Molly."

"Perhaps you can ease up now and not be so controlling."

"Staying in control is an occupational necessity. To be a good agent, I must stay in control, and this ranch would fold without a firm hand. Then there's the issue of keeping you and Sara Jane alive. . . ."

How could she argue with that? She looked away, unable to form a coherent sentence. Cloud shadows drifted across the compound. Molly bit her lower lip. Even if she accepted Matt's need for control, it didn't solve her problems. The ebb and flow of her emotions since coming to the ranch worked against her ability to think clearly. Confusion spun in her head like that whirling bull Matt had ridden, stomping her brain to mush and giving her a headache.

Matt began to hum softly. He glanced down at the sleeping baby cradled in his muscular arm with incredible love in his eyes. If Molly hadn't already fallen in love with him, she'd love him for that gentle look.

Two vaqueros walked the fence line past Molly and Matt, their gazes scanning the area with practiced eyes. “In spite of all the security, I still feel uneasy,” she said.

Matt frowned. “Maybe your concern is warranted.”

She blinked in surprise. “What do you mean?”

Matt’s jaw tightened. “Someone dropped the ball. My FBI team breached security by landing a helicopter in an open pasture. Then, wearing ranch clothes, they blended in with the vaqueros.” He paused to let the meaning sink in.

“Oh, God. And if they could do that—” Although she was sure now that Matt hadn’t brought her here as bait, leaving would be difficult. The barren beauty of the land and its ever-changing sky had seduced her. And so had this cowboy, but— “Matt, for Sara Jane’s sake, I have to leave the ranch.”

“I think that’s a good idea.”

“You do?” She had been ready to say, Don’t try to talk me out of it!

“It gets worse. Your detective friend, Arnie Kenner, is dead. Murdered.”

Murdered! Molly closed her eyes against a stab of pain. Her memory of Arnie was hazy, yet he’d been someone she’d . . . what? Trusted? Cared for? Loved?

Matt frowned. “I’m sorry. I guess you and he were pretty close.”

“I . . . I don’t know. Maybe . . .” Molly rubbed her forehead and tried to remember. Could Arnie have been her baby’s father?

“With the failed security and Del Fuego ordering hits on people, we need to relocate you.”

Relocate. She hated that word. “Do you have any idea what’s in store for the three of us? And where we might go?”

“I don’t know, yet.”

“We will be going together, won’t we?”

“That’s what I want. The other agents came to take you and Sara Jane to an undisclosed place, but I’m not willing to step aside unless it’s absolutely necessary for your safety. I may have to do a quickstep to avoid turning you over to them.”

“What does that mean?”

He shook his head. “I haven’t figured out the details.”

Matt had helped her face the trauma from her baby being kidnapped and the murder of her guards, but at what point would he wash his hands of her? With those agents pressuring him, it would be all too easy. "I know your family and ranch would be less of a target without me."

"That won't influence my decision. The question is, where do we go? I don't want us to jump from the frying pan into the fire." Matt rubbed his jaw. "Do you know how Arnie got the coins?"

"I remember asking. He said the less I knew the better. Why do men say things like that? It's never better to be kept in the dark."

"I get your point," Matt said, looking contrite. "Loud and clear."

*Good.* She opened the door to the ranch house and let him enter first. Matt sailed his Stetson across the room lassoing a limb of a hat tree. Then with Sara Jane still in his arms, he started up the stairs.

Molly stopped at the bottom step. "Want some coffee?"

Matt paused. "Nah. I'll give Sunshine a bottle and rock her to sleep. It'll give me time to think."

"How about after?"

"I'll pass. I have a lot to do before we leave."

Molly nodded. She knew Matt was still investigating Parker's murder, was questioning the vaqueros, was talking to the Morales sisters, was looking for clues. Would he delay their departure too long? "When do you think we'll leave?"

He smiled at her. "Soon, little darlin'. I'll let you know later tonight."

\* \* \* \*

Molly had a cup of coffee in the kitchen, then took a refill to her room with hope to talk to Matt, but he'd already gone. Sara Jane was sound asleep. Molly tried to read, but she couldn't concentrate. She sensed impending danger, as a blind person might when checking for solid ground and finding none. Molly got up and paced. She'd rest better once they were on their way.

Sara Jane awoke and Molly warmed the last bottle in the mini cooler and gave it to her. Poor little thing was so tired she went right back to sleep. Evening shadows darkened the walls. Molly switched on a night light, grabbed her empty cup, and headed downstairs.

Tita and Victoria sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee. "Can I get you a cup, Señora? You look like a wrung-out dish rag."

“I’ll get it myself. Thanks. It’s been a rough day for all of us.”

Victoria’s eyes were red and swollen, and Tita’s face was drawn. Molly poured herself a cup of the muddy liquid and sat down. She leveled a look at Tita and spoke softly. “I’m sorry about the abrupt way I grabbed Sara Jane and took off.”

“Forget it. Señor Matt has already explained.”

“Where’s that precious baby?” Victoria asked, her eyes looking a bit disappointed.

“Sleeping. She’s had a long day.”

“Speaking of a long day,” Tita said, “I must get home to Alfonso and Roberto. We’re expecting Roberto’s friend, Suzy, to come for a visit tomorrow. And I want to get a room ready for her.”

Molly smiled at the youthful budding romance.

“We’ll talk more before you leave in the morning,” Tita told Victoria. She hugged both of them, and disappeared out the door.

“That woman’s all heart,” Molly said.

“You are, too. Tita’s been telling me how you care for your daughter . . . and my son. And you didn’t deserve—” Victoria touched Molly’s hand. “I’m glad you came downstairs. I think Gavin and I owe you an apology. I know what you overheard and—”

“It’s all right. Matt and I got it straightened out.”

Victoria sighed. “The last few days have been horrible. Gavin feels so out of control, and for a Ryan, that’s tough to accept.”

Molly was tempted to say no kidding, but wisecracks wouldn’t be appropriate on the day of Parker’s funeral. Besides, this was her chance to learn more about the man who raised Matt. “Mr. Ryan must miss working the ranch.”

“Very much. Gavin was always a strong man and was disappointed when Parker and Luke didn’t measure up. He pinned all his hopes on Matt. But Matt wanted his own life and left the ranch. It was quite a blow to Gavin.”

“Yes, I can see how hard it would be for him to face the separation.” And the courage it must have taken for Matt to break away.

Victoria sighed. “Then Gavin developed heart trouble and lost his strength. For a man who valued strength and control, the loss was devastating.”

Molly nodded. It was clear where Matt got his need to run things.

“Matt was forced to come home and take over,” Victoria said.

“He might’ve hated the idea at first, but I believe he’s grown to love it here.”

“I think so, too. But Gavin feels guilty about forcing Matt into a life he didn’t want. At first I didn’t understand why, instead of showing pride and appreciation, Gavin finds fault. He’s really finding fault with himself. He feels so powerless, so helpless. And after Parker’s murder . . .”

Molly’s throat constricted at the pain in Victoria’s voice. She swallowed and said, “Mr. Ryan has had a lot to deal with, but try not to worry. Matt loves his father, and they’ll work this all out.”

Watching how Matt dealt with Parker and Luke had given Molly some insight into Matt’s character, but watching the way he and his parents related to each other brought Molly a clearer understanding of the Ryan family. Matt had been forced into the role of family protector, and his commitment was strengthened by FBI training that stressed his duty to protect. Maybe it went even deeper than that. Perhaps nurturing and protecting were part of his DNA, were built into his very soul. Now his love for her and her baby made this need to protect overwhelming.

“I met Parker’s wife,” Molly told Victoria. “Why isn’t Bev staying here?”

“Matt asked her to come. It would have given him more time with the children. But Bev and Luke’s wife, Connie Lou, both had run-ins with Gavin, and they swore never to cross the threshold when he was here.”

Molly wasn’t surprised. Gavin could be a royal pain in the butt, but she didn’t have to tell his wife that. “Divorce does terrible things to families.”

Victoria nodded sadly. “Parker and Luke didn’t want the divorces, and Gavin tried to stop the separations by telling Bev and Connie Lou that if they left the ranch, he’d get custody of their children.”

Molly lowered her eyes to hide her disgust. With the father-in-law interfering, no wonder the marriages failed. Would any marriage to a Ryan work? “Where are Bev and Connie Lou staying?” Molly knew there wasn’t a town close by.

“Bev and her children stayed all night with the Gomez family, and she and the boys will be leaving tomorrow. Connie Lou and her baby, Alicia, are staying with her parents. Her stepdad works for Matt and lives on the ranch.”

Luke had mentioned wanting a certain lady to respect him, and he was willing to go back into rehab to make that happen. If Gavin Ryan stayed out of things, maybe . . . “I think Luke would like to get back together with Connie Lou,” Molly said.

Victoria gave a small, wistful smile. “I wish. I miss baby Alicia, and Connie Lou’s a swell gal. She’s always been crazy in love with Luke. If he’d stop drinking, she’d be back in a heartbeat.”

Molly had the same notion. She’d seen both jealousy and love in Connie Lou’s eyes. Molly squeezed Victoria’s hand. “Let’s send good thoughts their way.”

“I haven’t given up hope.” Victoria tilted her head and studied Molly’s face. “What about you and Matt? Are you two working things out?”

“We’re trying . . .” Molly didn’t want to discuss the obstacles that loomed in their way to threaten their love.

## Chapter Eleven

It was dark outside when Luke stormed into the kitchen and slammed the door. Matt looked up in time to see Molly jump—the dish she'd just removed from the dishwasher slipped from her hands and shattered on the floor.

Luke stared down at the bits of china. "Sorry, didn't mean to startle you. I'm just so damned mad."

Matt stooped at Molly's side to help pick up the pieces of broken plate. Bending his head close to hers, he caught the honeysuckle scent of her perfume. "What's got you so riled up?" he asked his brother, feeling a little disturbed himself—but in a good way.

Luke waved his arms and began to pace. "Connie Lou. How can I fix things with her when she won't even talk to me?"

His wife. Relief washed over Matt—his brother wasn't interested in Molly after all.

"I went over to her parents' place, and they wouldn't even let me in the door." Luke's voice broke and he sounded pitiful. "Wouldn't even let me see my baby. When I phoned, her dad just hung up in my ear."

"Don't give up," Matt said. "You have to build her faith again. That may take some time."

Molly met Matt's gaze with unreadable eyes, then turned her attention to Luke. "Maybe a letter. Tell Connie Lou your plans, how things will be better in the future."

Luke made a sound of disgust. "She'd probably tear it up without reading it."

"Write it," Matt said. "I'll see if I can get her to read it."

"You'd do that?"

"Yeah. Just mean what you write. From the heart, bro. Okay?"

Luke nodded. He grabbed a broom and a dust pan to sweep up the residual fragments. "Thanks for the letter idea, Molly. I'll try not to barge in like a bull in a china shop next time."

It wasn't your fault," Molly said. "I'm a little edgy."

That was an understatement if Matt ever heard one. He had a hunch that Ramon's presence on the ranch made Molly so skittish. Or maybe it was the ranch in general. She probably wouldn't feel safe until they left.

Luke shoved the broom and the dustpan back into the pantry.



“I know a cure for jittery nerves.” Matt shook some sugar cubes from a jar and stuffed them in his pocket, then grabbed his Stetson off the hook. “Luke, will you listen for Sara Jane? I think Molly needs to get out of the house for a while.”

Matt guided her to the barn. The familiar smell of hay and horses was reassuring. But maybe not to Molly. She was a city girl. When this was over, would she go back to Dallas and her reporter job? The thought knotted his stomach. How could he lose her and the baby who’d become his little sunshine?

Best to concentrate on the moment, he thought. He had them for now and would stay with them until Del Fuego was behind bars.

Matt led Starlight and Gold King out of their stalls and handed Molly a curry comb. “Nothing clears the head like spending a little time with horses.” If only she’d come to love these animals the way he did. He reached in his pocket and brought out a few sugar cubes. “These will put you in good stead with the lady.”

Molly took the cubes and held one out on her flat palm for Starlight. She laughed as the horse nuzzled her hand.

Matt loved to hear her laugh. They were both worried, wrung out from the funeral and everything else going on, and needed time to relax. “See? You feel better already.”

She stroked the horse’s shiny neck and started combing. She whispered something to Starlight.

“No secrets, ladies.”

“I just told her that she’s a beautiful horse.”

Matt flashed Molly a tender look. “You want her? She’s yours.”

Again, he couldn’t interpret the expression that crossed Molly’s face. “I doubt they’ll let me keep a horse in the Witness Protection Program,” she said.

He combed Gold King’s strawberry coat, soothing himself as much as the horse. “I hope that’ll be behind us soon.”

Molly closed her eyes briefly. “Me, too. But with the string of dead bodies Del Fuego has left in his wake—”

Matt stiffened. Parker was one of the bodies.

“I’m sorry, Matt,” she said softly. “If I could take back that call—”

Matt stopped combing Gold King and drew Molly into his arms. “What’s done is done. The main thing now is to keep you and Sunshine safe and stop the killing.”

Molly nodded without conviction. He felt her tremble. He wanted to bring back her smile. "Hey, want to try your hand at bull riding?"

"You've got to be kidding!"

Matt laughed. "Are you game?"

"I don't think so," she quipped. "But thanks for asking."

She helped him lead the horses back into the stalls.

"Come on. It'll be fun." He took her hand and led her to the bull-riding machine at the back of the barn. It had a body covered in tough leather, complete with a bull rope around the machine's middle. "I used to practice on this when I was a kid. A motor makes it buck, pitch, and spin like a live bull."

Molly shook her head. "If you think I'm going to get on that robotic bull, you're nuts."

"Aw, c'mon, be a sport. It's fun. And it's a good way to develop style without worrying about getting trampled. But of course you'd need practice sessions on a living, breathing animal if you were going to ride a real bull."

"That'd be a cold day in hell."

"Get on. I'll set it on low and be right here to catch you if you fall."

She hesitated, but he could see that she wanted to. He swung her atop the simulator and placed his hands on her belly and bottom, bringing her into position. Her eyes widened at his touch.

He forced himself to continue as though unaffected. "Tilt your pelvis and lean forward."

With her astride in that provocative position, and the warmth of her body in his hands, he felt himself swelling with arousal and almost forgot what it was he was trying to teach her.

"Well?" she said.

He handed her his hat. "Here, hold onto my Stetson with your left hand, like this, and put your arm up." Just so he could touch her again, he positioned her arm. He rested his hand on the switch. "Call out when you're ready."

She rolled her eyes. "Just flick it."

He obliged. When the machine whirled and bucked, Molly's hair tumbled into her face, but she kept her form and held that Stetson high.

"Hey, that's not bad!" He was surprised by her balance and instinctive ability. And she hung on to the Stetson like a professional. "Are you sure you haven't done this before?"

“Make it go faster,” she called, almost breathless.

He turned the switch up another notch or two, and then waited for her to fall into his arms. A second later, she was there where she belonged and he kissed her soundly. “Good ride, cowgirl.”

She radiated heat and excitement, and his body responded. He thought of the hayloft, of them entangled in one another’s arms in the sweet fresh hay, secluded in their own little world.

He lowered her feet to the floor, but kept his arm around her. “Hey, want to see my Thinking Window?”

Molly laughed. “Is that like asking a girl up to see your etchings?”

His heart hammered against his chest. “Could be. But it’s also a place I used to go to figure things out.” It would be great if something as simple as looking through a window really could give him the answers he needed. At least, it would give them privacy.

\* \* \* \*

Molly watched Matt pull a horse blanket from under the saddles lined up in the tack room and gesture to a ladder. “Ladies first.” The twinkle in his eyes sent shivers up her spine.

She climbed ahead of him to the hayloft. A dim light from the lower level guided their way. Moonlight from an open space near the eaves splayed silver fingers across the straw-covered floor.

“This is your Thinking Window?” It was just the open double-door passageway to the loft.

“Disappointed?”

She couldn’t restrain her laugh. “The last line’s yet to be written.”

“That’s right, reporters gather all the facts first, don’t they?”

“If they want to last.” She bit her lip. She’d been a thorough, diligent, go-getter.

Was her life as a reporter behind her—and did a different future lie ahead? She wasn’t sure what she wanted, or if she’d even have a choice. What if the trial failed to end the danger?

Matt spread the blanket onto a nest of sweet-scented straw near the edge of the opening and drew her down to sit in front of him between his legs. He wrapped his arms around her. His chest was warm and solid against her back. The muffled thud of hooves as horses shifted in the stalls below soothed Molly in ways she was afraid to analyze. She leaned back into the curve of Matt’s body and looked out.

The loft towered above the ranch, and lights flickered in the windows of other buildings, but what caught her attention was the blue-black sky filled with glittering stars. City stars had never been so big, or so bright.

“When you look out, what do you see?”

“I see a veil of serenity.” She couldn’t stop a shiver from slithering up her spine.

Matt drew her closer. “Look again. It’s not a veil. It’s a shield. Until we leave, I’ve ordered everyone on high alert.”

“This means we’re probably being watched right this minute.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, they’re still there, all right, but they know when to give a man and woman some privacy.”

“I know Sara Jane is safe and that you’ve taken every precaution, but there’s this warning signal in my brain whenever she’s out of my sight.”

“Some degree of residual trauma from when Del Fuego kidnapped her is normal.” Matt’s deep voice lulled Molly, mesmerized her. “What you need, little darlin’, is a massage. And that happens to be my specialty.”

He put slight pressure on her back with his palms, and she leaned forward a bit.. He began to knead her back, digging his fingers into her flesh, finding and eliminating tension-filled spots.

Guitar music came from the bunk house. Someone was singing “*Como Haze Calor?*” It was aptly a song about heat, since Matt’s touch was sending flames coursing through her veins.

“So how does this Thinking Window work?”

“When I was a boy, I’d come up here and look at those big, fat stars, and my confusion would clear and I’d know the right thing to do.”

She felt his warm breath in her hair, his lips moist on the side of her neck. “And what are the stars telling you to do now?” The huskiness in her own voice surprised her.

With a quick movement, he lifted her, and she ended up beside him. Before she could catch her breath, he laid her back on the blanket and leaned over her. “This,” he said and touched his lips to hers. The kiss caught fire like straw touched by flames. She wound her arms around his neck and drew him closer while inhaling his clean, desert scent and teasing his probing tongue. He lowered himself onto her, and his arousal pressed hard against her thigh. Need shot through her, and she didn’t fight it.

They would part soon enough, and history would repeat itself. In the end, she would suffer hurt and disappointment, but she’d have this memory. She’d learned the hard way that life was empty without memories.

Hot desire raged between them. Matt fumbled with the buttons of her shirt then unhooked her bra. His strong, warm hands caressed her breasts, then moved on to unfasten her jeans and slide them over her hips.

She laughed and rolled away. “My turn. Two can play this game.”

Molly rose to her knees and grabbed the collar of his chambray shirt and yanked. The snap buttons gave; the material parted. He shrugged out of his shirt. She ran her hands over Matt’s chest muscles, reveling in their smooth hardness. Seeking more of him, she lowered her hands and unbuckled his belt, unzipped his Levi’s. He struggled out of the body-fitting denim, kicking it into a tangled heap.

Breathless and nude, they tumbled to the blanket, and he slid a hand down to her thigh. She gasped when he stroked between her legs. She inhaled and tried to relax, but she couldn’t—the excitement in her began to build again. She arched into his cupped hand.

The smell of hay and their mingled body scents wafted in the air around them. The muted music in the distance slowed, but its soothing tones failed to calm her racing heart. Her core throbbed with arousal. “Now, Matt. Now.”

“We’re going over the moon,” he murmured, while extending the pleasure, stretching it.

When she thought she couldn’t bear it a second longer, he took her higher than the stars glittering down at them. Then, he slipped inside her. She closed her eyes, and they began to move together in perfect oneness. The slow tempo increased until fireworks exploded in her head. Then she and Matt soared past the moon, skyrocketing higher and higher—to the zenith. She cried out his name, gasping.

Matt collapsed beside her, both of them glistening with sweat, and he held her tight. They floated in warm unity. Blissful silence wrapped around Molly like velvety petals of a closing rosebud.

Matt kissed her temple. “Can we stay like this for a while?”

She laughed softly. “I couldn’t move if I had to.”

He kissed her eyelids. “Take a short nap. I’ll keep watch and try to get my Thinking Window to work.”

At least he didn’t say they’d made a mistake. Why would he? For an instant, she almost remembered something familiar, something important—then it was gone.

She tucked her head against his shoulder. She felt safe in his arms, boneless, relaxed. Her eyelids became heavy, and she let them flutter closed. Sleep claimed her, then plunged her into a dream . . .

*“As much as I want you,” Matt said in a ragged voice, “making love is a mistake. I have to leave. Probably forever.” She touched his lips with her fingertips, quieting his protests. Then, she wantonly seduced him, certain she could persuade him to stay . . .*

Molly awoke in Matt’s arms troubled and not sure why. Vaguely, she knew her uneasiness had something to do with the dream she’d just had, but she couldn’t bring the memory forward.

“You really zonked out for about fifteen minutes,” Matt said, “then you cried out, ‘No.’” He gently touched her face. “Are you okay?”

“Just a . . .troubling dream.”

“Want to tell me about it?” Matt asked as they struggled back into their clothes.

She forced a smile. “It’s vanished. I can’t seem to bring it back.”

He gave her a long, searching look that made her lower her eyes. They finished dressing in an awkward silence.

Matt went ahead of her down the ladder. Before she reached the bottom, he grasped her waist and swung her to the floor. She should say something. Her mind whirled. Matt put his arm around her and led her out of the barn into the moonlight. Even the bunkhouse and fences looked shimmery and beautiful in the soft brightness. Suddenly, she felt exhilarated and a little foolish for letting a dream depress her.

When they reached the ranch house, Luke was waiting in the living room. “Sara Jane never made a peep.” He bid them goodnight with a knowing smile and headed out the door.

Molly frowned. Was there a sign hanging around her neck announcing that she’d just made love? That was ridiculous, of course. “I had the feeling Luke knew what we did.”

Matt looked at Molly for a moment then withdrew a piece of straw from her hair. “If we don’t want anyone to know, maybe we shouldn’t leave evidence in your hair.”

Molly groaned but had to chuckle. “What must he think of me!”

“Should we call him back and ask?”

“No!”

“Luke knows I love you, so forget it. We need to discuss your safety.”

Molly shivered. “I’ve been thinking about that and keep coming up with the same answer. No place is one hundred percent safe. Del Fuego’s gang has already killed two guards, Arnie, your brother, and only God knows how many others.” She sighed. “Too bad your Thinking Window didn’t work.”

He gave her a small, sad smile. “Oh, but it did. While you lay in my arms getting your beauty sleep, I thought it all out. We can slip away before dawn and fly to Mexico. Dr. De La Fuente has a sister in Taxco.”

“Taxco?”

“It’s a charming place—off the beaten path. There’d be no connection to leave a trail, and we could disappear until the trial. The only drawback is that Del Fuego might go underground, too, and we could lose him.”

“If it weren’t for Sara Jane, I’d be your bait, Matt, but—”

“That’s never been an option. The coins were our big break. We have agents closing in on Del Fuego’s villa now. If he’s there, this could be over soon.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Get packed and be ready to go at a moment’s notice, then try to get some sleep.”

A puzzling sense of urgency rose in her, and she followed him down the hall. “What about you?”

“I want to talk to our FBI guests, then make some arrangements of my own.” Matt stopped at the nursery and tiptoed inside.

Arrangements? The word pounded in her head. “Don’t wake Sara Jane.” Packing would go faster if the baby stayed asleep. It was then Molly heard cooing.

“Oh, hot damn,” Matt said. “Sunshine’s turning herself over.”

When Sara Jane finished the roll, she lifted her head and kicked her feet, as though delighted with herself. Matt touched the dark auburn hair on the back of the baby’s head. “Is this kid a genius or what?”

Molly smiled. Even Sara Jane’s real father couldn’t love her more. Molly swallowed past the lump in her throat. Dared she hope that they could become a family?

What if the real father surfaced? Arnie and the witness protection guards were dead. What if her baby’s father was someone other than one of them? *Please, God, let me remember . . .*

Matt played with Sara Jane for a few minutes. “I could stay here all night, Sunshine,” he told the baby. “But I’d better get going.”

“Yes, go.” Molly had an urge to shove him and get him moving. “And hurry back.”

Matt kissed Molly’s temple, then slipped out the door.

Molly diapered the baby and gave her a bottle. She rocked her until the thick-lashed eyes drifted closed, then put the infant down and tucked a sheet around her.

Molly's hands shook as she threw things into bags. What would she need in Mexico? It didn't matter. She'd take a few changes of clothing for herself and most of Sara Jane's stuff.

She finished stuffing their belongings into bags and suitcases, then showered. Matt had said to be ready at a moment's notice. That might mean in the wee hours of the morning while it was still dark. Molly dressed in jeans and shirt and climbed into bed fully clothed.

Where was Matt? Her earlier shadowy dream still troubled her. She made a playful plea to her subconscious, *Molly to subliminal—come in. How about a replay of that dream? And this time let me remember it.* What if she couldn't sleep? But exhaustion claimed her, and as she had hoped, the dream she'd had earlier played again.

Sara Jane cried.

Molly awoke quickly, the dream fresh in her mind. She touched the other side of the bed. It was empty—just like it had been that night so long ago. Oh, God. She remembered who'd fathered her baby.

\* \* \* \*

At midnight, Matt finally got through to the FBI SWAT commander who had led the invasion of Del Fuego's villa.

"Everyone escaped," the commander said. "Only a few frightened servants remained."

Matt frowned. "What about Del Fuego's private airfield?"

"Deserted. Looks like they moved their squadron."

"Squadron?" Matt knew they had a couple of Cessnas—what else?

"Yeah. At least two helicopters and four planes. One he rents out to farmers for crop dusting, or so he claims."

"That's a helluva lot of air power."

"Yeah," the commander said. "But as you know, without concrete proof of illegal operations, our hands have been tied."

Matt made a sound of disgust. "And now that we have hard evidence, the bastard's gone underground."

"We'll get him," the commander said. "It's just a matter of time."



Matt swallowed past the constriction in this throat—time was about to run out. “I’d appreciate an update if Del Fuego is sighted.”

After Matt hung up, he paced the barn’s office. For far too long, Del Fuego had gotten away with female slavery involving forced prostitution, drug trafficking, and murder. And now the SOB had added baby-selling to his sins. The world wouldn’t be safe until jail doors closed permanently on the bastard. Where the hell was he?

A cold feeling in the pit of Matt’s stomach spurred him into action. He grabbed his cellular phone and called a meeting. After Alfonso, Luke, and the three FBI agents gathered in the office, Matt briefed them on the situation, then turned to Alfonso. “I have an uneasy feeling about Del Fuego’s disappearance. I want double guards through the night. Have Octavo cut the outside lighting to a minimum.” Octavo Cruz did all the ranch electrical work and could set the system quickly.

“I’ll call him when we’re through here,” Alfonso said.

“Good. The sooner, the better.” Matt turned to the FBI agents. “I need you guys to man your computers and cellars and remain in constant contact with headquarters. If an update comes in on Del Fuego’s whereabouts, I want to know.”

When Matt finished, Luke pulled him aside while keeping his eyes on Ramon. “What if someone on this ranch is in cahoots with Del Fuego?”

“That’s where you come in,” Matt said. “Keep an eye on anyone acting suspiciously.” He wanted to include his brother in all of the plan, to make him feel trusted, needed, but he didn’t yet have complete faith in how Luke would hold up under pressure and decided to withhold the part about going to Mexico.

While everyone filed out of the room, he asked Alfonso to stay so he could tell him the plans he didn’t want his brother or the other agents to know.

Alfonso took in the information, nodded, and then heading out the door, he said, “I’ll meet you at the airstrip for last minute details before you leave.”

“Thanks,” Matt called to Alfonso’s back.

Matt glanced at his watch. It was two in the morning. He sighed and got up from his desk. He could grab a few hours of sleep before takeoff—

A faint sound caught his attention. The hairs on the back of his neck seemed to stand straight up as he recognized the droning hum of an airplane engine growing louder by the second. He ran to the window, reached it just as the plane passed overhead, and saw an unnatural silvery fog illuminated in the ranch compound lights.

He watched in horror as men fell one after another. Del Fuego’s crop duster must’ve spewed some sort of sleeping gas. Was it lethal? He couldn’t go outside to help without protection, or he’d fall just like his men. Even now, the gas could be floating into the barn, swirling

around his animals. No way to stop it. Soon, it would seep under the doorway of his office. If he were unconscious he'd be of no help to anyone. And he had to get to Molly and Sara Jane . . .

He tied his neck scarf over his mouth and nose, and then opened a supply cabinet. Where the hell was his mask? Searching hastily, he jerked things down from the shelves until at last he found what he was looking for. He grabbed the mask used for spraying and hoped to God it would protect him against whatever gas was decimating his security detail.

He heard the sound of aircraft again—not just one this time. It sounded like a whole fleet of planes was flying over his ranch, planes, helicopters, everything that Del Fuego had at his disposal. Scalding adrenaline shot through Matt's veins when he heard the thrust of power decelerate. *Son of a bitch.* They were landing on the dirt road near the pasture. Sharp blasts of gunfire punctuated the night air.

It sounded like some of his men were still conscious and were putting up a fight. The gun cabinet in his office was locked, as usual. No time to waste—Matt smashed his way into the cabinet, snatched up a high-powered rifle and shells, and loaded as many as he could into the gun as he bolted from the barn office. The whir of helicopter propellers came from the direction of the ranch house. His heart pounded. Molly!

\* \* \* \*

The roar of engines and hum of propellers awakened Molly from a light sleep. Nerves jangled, she raced to the window. A helicopter had set down in the clearing in front of the ranch house. Five men wearing gas masks and black flight suits raced toward the house.

She had to be caught in a nightmare.

The front door crashed open. Booted feet pounded across the tile floor and thudded up the stairs, closer and closer. *Oh, God, this is real. I have to get to Sara Jane!*

She ran into the dimly lit hallway. A man at the top of the stairs lunged toward her. His arms closed around her like steel shackles. She struggled and kicked. The gas mask hid his face, but his muscular body and ash-blond hair convinced her it was Webb Viceman, the man Luke suspected of killing Parker. Behind Webb, a tall wiry man with coal black hair charged into the nursery and returned a second later carrying her crying baby.

“Don’t hurt her,” Molly screamed.

The Latino man shouted through the gas mask to the others searching the house. “We have both of them.”

Even muffled, Molly recognized the voice—Paulo Santana, the pilot who’d first brought Webb to the ranch.

“We got an old couple,” another man called from down the hall. “What’ll we do with them?”

“Tie them up. If they give you trouble, shoot them.”

Closing her eyes, Molly thought of Gavin’s bad heart and his stubborn streak. She prayed he’d do as he was told.

Santina put a gas mask over her baby’s tiny face. Sara Jane screamed at the top of her lungs and shook her head to get it off. Molly’s stomach knotted. Her baby’s cries broke her heart. “Don’t, please! She won’t be able to breathe.”

“You want her to breathe sleeping gas? Who knows what it will do to a baby?”

Before Molly could respond, Webb shoved a mask against her face. “Strap it on.”

When she obeyed, he hustled her, struggling and kicking, down the stairs and out of the house toward the helicopter. The propellers whipped the air, pushing the sleeping gas away from the immediate area. She had to delay them somehow. If she got into the craft, she was dead.

Carrying the baby, Santina ran ahead and climbed in. Now Molly had no choice but to get in. She had to stay with her baby. *Think! They haven’t killed me—yet.* Del Fuego must want her alive . . .at least long enough to question her. Maybe he thought she still had the coins. She clung to that hope.

“Get in,” Webb growled.

Molly nodded, but faked a couple of false starts by hopping about as though she couldn’t climb in on her own. Webb cursed, then lifted her and shoved her inside. He stood guard outside the door, waiting for the men who had stayed behind to tie up Victoria and Gavin. “Come on, come on,” he said, urging his crew.

Damn, she wished she knew how to fly a helicopter. Oh, yeah, and how would she get rid of these bozos if she could? But she had to do something. She faced Santina with her arms outstretched. “Please, just let me hold my baby.”

Santina hesitated, then shoved the screaming baby into her arms. She braced herself against a seat and kicked Santina out the door and into Webb who was clambering inside. The action thrust Webb against the three men behind him. Off balance, the men fell like a row of dominos. She put Sara Jane onto a seat, grabbed the door, and yanked it shut. After she rotated the latch to a locked position, she seized her baby and huddled on the floor. *I’ve done all I can do, Matt. The rest is up to you.*

\* \* \* \*

Just before the men had emerged from the house, Matt had crouched behind a water trough and taken aim at the gas tank of the chopper figuring if he could put a couple of holes in it, it might leak enough fuel that escape would be impossible. Before he could get a shot off, men raced out of the house hustling Molly and the baby into the helicopter. He couldn’t

shoot now. *Damn it, I need a miracle.* Then he got it. Molly kicked out, sending the men tumbling to the ground, and then shut the helicopter door. *That's my girl!*

The barred door wouldn't keep those men out for long. Already, they were struggling to their feet. Matt fired to drive them back from the chopper. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his brother stumble around the side of the bunkhouse with a rifle in his hand. Luke ducked behind a barrel and took aim at the chopper's gas tank. "Luke, no! Molly and the baby are inside!"

"Oh, dear God," Luke said with horror in his tone.

Del Fuego's men whirled toward the sound of Luke's outcry. Someone fired. Matt's breath caught as he saw his little brother fall backward. Then, the gunfire turned on Matt. A bullet grazed his shoulder. Matt returned fire, driving them back away from the chopper. Some of Matt's men were regaining consciousness and were staggering to their feet, pulling out weapons, and shooting. Bullets flew in both directions.

The helicopter crew retreated behind the chopper to a metal shed. Matt wanted to go to his brother and see how bad he was hurt. But he had to get Molly and Sara Jane out of there. A stray bullet could hit the gas tank and—

"Cover me!" he called to the revived vaqueros.

Amid blazing bullets, Matt ran to the chopper and banged on the door. "Open up, Molly! You're not safe in there. A bullet could hit the gas tank."

To his relief, she slid the door open, handed him the baby, and jumped out. "Go! I'm right behind you."

Zigzagging, they ran to the barn and slipped inside. "Are Mom and Dad okay?" Matt asked, breathing hard.

"The men tied them up."

Matt prayed they weren't hurt.

Molly gasped. "You're bleeding!"

"Just a flesh wound. Take Sara Jane, go to my office and stay there until I come for you. Lock yourself in."

She clutched his arm. "Where are you going?"

"Luke's been shot and needs help."

\* \* \* \*

Molly paced the office, jiggling Sara Jane. “Come on, sweetie, stop crying. We’re safe now.” She hoped she was right about that. She saw the gun cabinet, the shells. She didn’t know anything about guns. Could she run a bluff?

Sara Jane’s cries lessened to whimpers, then quieted. “Such a good baby,” Molly crooned. “Mommy’s sorry you’ve had to go through all this.”

Where could she hide her baby if it became necessary? Could a baby breathe in a desk drawer? If she cried, it would give her away.

More gunfire echoed through the night air. Molly’s stomach knotted. Luke had been shot. She’d brought all this trouble to Matt’s ranch. What about Matt? Please, God . . . Matt could be shot again. This time fatally. She prayed harder than she’d ever prayed before. She couldn’t bear it if Matt were killed. She loved him. *And he is my baby’s father.*

How would she tell him? What if he were killed before she had the chance? She closed her eyes and refused to dwell on such a horrible thought.

Molly shivered. What if something happened to her? The secret would die with her. She wanted Matt to know. She didn’t want to think the worst, but just in case . . . She picked up a pen from Matt’s desk and on a notepad she printed,

*My dearest Matt, In case things go wrong I wanted you to know—you are Sara Jane’s father. Take care of her. I love you. Molly.*

She heard footsteps outside the office. Her skin prickled. Had Matt returned for her? It seemed too soon. She looked through the glass section of the door. Someone had turned out the lights in the barn—there was nothing but blackness. She flicked off the office lamp.

Hooves moved about restlessly. A horse whinnied. She crouched behind the desk. “Please, Sara Jane, don’t cry.”

The door crashed in. Men with flashlights rushed in. Circles of light skittered around the room. “Look who I found,” said a bear of a man with a boxer’s misshapen nose

“*Muy bueno*, Claudio,” another man said.

Claudio ignored the praise. “Get up.”

Four men with guns stared down at her. She rose to her feet while patting her baby’s back.

“Hand over the kid,” Claudio said.

“No, please! She’s terrified!”

Claudio pointed his gun at the baby’s head. “Better scared than dead.”

With her heart thudding against her ribs, Molly drew her baby closer. "Don't take her from me. Please!"

He pulled back the hammer on the gun. "Lady, I'm not playin'."

With a raw ache in her throat, Molly handed her baby to him.

"We're going out the back way to a waiting plane," he said. "I'm going first with the kid. If you care about her, you'll keep up, and come along quietly."

One of the other men grabbed her arm. "Let's go."

## Chapter Twelve

Matt's men returned fire from behind makeshift barricades of old machinery and bales of hay. Matt ran from the barn to Alfonso. "Are all the men okay?"

"Si. The gas knocked them out, but the wind worked in our favor and cleared the fumes out pronto."

Matt tilted his head toward the helicopter. "What's the status?"

"Two of the crew down. Three to go. But we've got *mucho problemas* coming from every direction. The ranch is swarming with Del Fuego's men."

"Where are our FBI heroes?" Matt couldn't keep the contempt from his tone.

"Looking for Molly. I told them you took her to the barn."

"Good." They wanted to take over the job of protecting her—take her away from him. He didn't want the FBI hotshots near Molly and the baby, but until he could return to her, their temporary protection gave him peace of mind. After he checked on Luke, he would send the agents back here to help. "Hold the fort. Luke's down. Gotta see how bad he's hurt." Damn. Molly . . . Luke . . . and his parents all needed him. And he should stay and fight beside his men. He had to make choices. "Send someone to the house to check on my parents."

"Si. I'll send Lorenzo."

Matt squeezed Alfonso's shoulder. "*Gracias, amigo.*"

Dodging bullets, Matt ran in a crouch to where his brother had fallen. He skidded to his knees, placed his rifle on the ground next to Luke's weapon, and pulled his brother into his arms. Luke's eyes blinked open. His hair was matted with blood. "You hurt bad, bro?" Matt asked past the lump in his throat.

"My ear."

Matt wiped away the blood with his neck scarf. His throat constricted. A slice of ear was blown clean away. Other than the loss of blood, the wound wasn't life threatening. Relief washed over him. "Just grazed," he said. "You'll live."

Luke pointed to Matt's blood-soaked sleeve. "Looks like you've lost a little blood yourself."

"Yeah, well, it's been a helluva night."

Matt strapped the rifles over his shoulder with his belt, placed his brother's arm around his neck, and helped him to his feet. "Stay low. Hold this cloth tight over your ear. I'll get you to the barn and Molly can patch you up."

"I'd be okay if my head would just quit spinnin'."

The barn door squeaked as Matt yanked it open and helped Luke inside. His eyes met a wall of blackness. Why were the lights out? Horses stomped restlessly. The fine hairs on the back of Matt's neck prickled.

"Can you stand on your own?" He braced Luke against a wall. "I have to find a flashlight."

"Yeah, I'm fine. Go on." The grit in his brother's voice sent a surge of warmth through Matt. The kid was okay. Would he always think of him as a kid? Being married with a baby of his own sure as hell hadn't matured Luke. Maybe someday.

Matt smoothed his hand over the wall, feeling for the flashlight he'd hung on a hook by the door. Bingo. He flicked it on, then helped his brother to a bale of hay. "Sit here."

He tried the closest light switch. Nothing. He headed for the electrical box. The door stood open—someone had switched off the main lever. He thrust it back on. With the lights working again, he returned to his brother.

The world began to spin like a crazed bull. Matt slumped down next to Luke. Luke's eyes widened. "You're gettin' a little green around the gills, bro."

Matt shook his head, trying to clear the dizziness.

Blood trickled from Luke's ear and soaked his collar. He struggled to his feet. "We have to stop your bleeding!" Luke's voice boomed with strength considering his condition. He was more of a fighter than Matt had given him credit for.

"You're the one who needs treatment." Sucking in extra oxygen, Matt fought to stay alert. His brother's inner strength and courage in an emergency surprised him. Made him proud.

"You first, then me," Luke said. Holding on to the wall, he made it to a shelf where they kept a half-dozen emergency medical kits. "We gotta stop your bleedin' or you'll be no good to anyone."

Matt looked down at his blood-soaked sleeve. Luke was right. He needed to stop the bleeding. If he didn't, he might pass out. "Okay. Make it snappy." He shrugged out of his shirt.

Luke dressed Matt's wound with trembling hands, blinking and shaking his head as though he might black out again. He managed to stop the bleeding and get Matt's shoulder bandaged before slumping into Matt's arms.

Under different circumstances, he might have just slapped Luke conscious, but with the injury to his head, it wouldn't be wise. He grabbed an ampoule of ammonia from the medical kit and waved it under his brother's nose.

"I'm okay . . . I'm okay." Luke's speech was slurred.



“The hell you are.” Matt swabbed Luke’s ear. “Face the light so I can see what I’m doing.” Molly could do a better job of this, but it was a gamble to wait.

“Anybody ever tell you that you’re bossy as hell?” Luke asked.

Matt was too busy to answer. He did a quick cleanup of Luke’s wound and suppressed the flow of blood with pressure. He needed to do a good job, but he also had a driving sense of urgency to get to Molly.

“Ouch,” Luke said, flinching.

“Hold still,” Matt growled. He pressed on a thick square of gauze and then wrapped a bandage around Luke’s head to hold it in place. Matt removed two packets of painkillers and closed the first aid kit with a decisive snap. He handed a packet to Luke. He didn’t know what the doctor might say about giving codeine to an alcoholic, but this was an emergency. Without waiting for water to wash them down, Luke popped two pills into his mouth and swallowed. Matt could hold out and wash his down with water when he got to his office.

Groaning, Matt eased back into his shirt. He grabbed his rifle. “You’ll be okay now. I’m going to check on Molly and find out who turned off the lights.” Maybe Molly doused them for some reason . . . or maybe the FBI hotshots did it.

Luke struggled to his feet and grabbed his rifle. “I’m coming with you.”

“No, you stay put.” Matt ran toward the office, his brother following anyway.

Matt’s breath caught. The office door hung off its hinges. No one was inside.

\* \* \* \*

A coyote howled mournfully in the distance while pops of gunfire echoed from the ranch. But it was Sara Jane’s top-of-her-lungs cries that held Molly’s attention and twisted her heart.

Molly’s leg muscles burned, and her breath came in labored gasps, but she kept pace with her captors. She couldn’t hang back—the man ahead had her baby! She hadn’t been able to protect her own child. What was she going to do?

Claudio seemed to be the leader. He was dirty, with cruel eyes, not someone she wanted to even touch her baby. Moonlight distorted the pasture’s terrain, and Molly stepped into a hole and fell. “Pedro!” Claudio barked, and then ordered in Spanish, “Keep her moving.”

Pedro, a squat man with slits for eyes, yanked her to her feet and stuck a gun in her ribs. “Fall again, and I’ll shoot you.”

She had to keep her wits. Her mother’s words echoed in her head, “It’s not what happens to you—it’s how you handle it.” If she lived through this, she’d have to identify these men in court. Except for Claudio, the guy with the misshapen boxer’s nose, they were all dark-

skinned Latinos. Black flight suits from head to toe hid any scars or other distinguishing marks.

Molly kept her eyes on the wide back of the man who had her baby. It was useless to look for ways to escape. While they had her baby, they had her.

Ahead, a plane engine roared in readiness. A man with a rifle shouted in Spanish for them to hurry. Since escape was out of the question, she'd have to board. Once she did, any chance for rescue would end.

\* \* \* \*

Matt stared at the unhinged door. Molly and Sara Jane were gone. His gut knotted. Luke brushed past him, looking around at the empty room. His glance caught a sheet of paper that had drifted to the floor. Someone wearing dirty boots had stepped on it. "Matt. Look."

A chill ran down Matt's spine. He grabbed the sheet of paper that his brother held out to him. When he scanned the words, he felt the blood drain from his face, and his throat went dry. "I'm Sara Jane's father." He gripped the desk. *I'm Sara Jane's father. My Sunshine. Our daughter.*

"No bombshell to me," Luke drawled. He grabbed Matt by his uninjured arm. "Pass out the cigars later. We gotta get my niece back."

"Right!" A surge of adrenaline pulsed through Matt's veins and propelled him into action. He filled a paper cup with water and gulped down the painkillers. He couldn't let pain mess up his aim or slow him down. He grabbed extra shells from the gun cabinet and handed some to Luke. "Can you make it?"

"Sure. Our crusty ol' man may have raised misfits, but he didn't raise no wimps."

At the rear of the barn, Matt heard the crash of a feed bucket hitting concrete. "Molly?"

Luke and Matt raced to the sound and found the three FBI men bound and gagged. A bucket lay beside Ramon's rope-lashed ankles. Somehow, he had knocked the pail off the hook with his head.

Matt yanked the cloth from Ramon's mouth. "Where's Molly and the baby?"

"Del Fuego's men took them to a plane in the east pasture."

"Untie these guys," Matt told Luke.

Luke whipped out a pocketknife and cut the ropes around Ramon's wrists. He handed his knife to the agent. "Cut your buddies loose. I gotta go." Then he and Matt slipped out the door. With Matt in the lead, they ran across the pasture in long strides, bullet wounds forgotten, strengthened by raw determination to save Molly and the baby.

In the distance, by the light of the full moon, Matt saw a Cessna taxi along the road that cut through the pasture. His gut knotted tighter, and his throat constricted as he watched it increase its speed, then lift and take to the air. Dear God. They had Molly. And they had his baby!

\* \* \* \*

Tears pressed at Molly's eyes as she watched Matt running across the pasture, silhouetted by a full moon and the glow from the ranch lights. With her index finger, she touched the windowpane. Her hero raced to the rescue—mere minutes too late.

*Don't blame yourself, cowboy. You did the best you could. Accept it. You can't control everything.*

Had he found her note? Under the circumstances, maybe it would have been better for him to never have known.

The plane climbed. Then the ranch she'd come to love disappeared into the blackness, leaving just the glistening line of Verde Creek, the place Matt had kissed her before her memory returned. Soon that silvery line disappeared, too. A tear rolled down her cheek. She brushed it away and took a deep breath. Okay. She was stuck with this mess, and she'd better handle it right. She was all Sara Jane had now.

Grim faced, Claudio sat in a passenger seat next to Molly with the baby in his lap. Sara Jane's cries had faded to whimpers. But when the plane climbed higher, she started screaming again. The baby swatted at her ears with tiny fists. "My baby's in pain," Molly said. "Please give her to me."

He thrust the baby at her. "Shut her up. That squalling's getting on my nerves."

Molly closed her eyes briefly as she gathered Sara Jane close and reveled in the feel of the baby's warmth. "It's her ears. The pressure. Get something for her to drink. She needs to swallow to stop her ears from hurting."

Claudio glared at her with narrowed eyes. "I don't take orders from a prisoner—especially a woman."

Damn him. She'd like to lunge at him, scratch his eyes out. "All this crying will make Sara Jane ill. Does your boss want a sick baby on his hands?" Claudio stared at her, the wheels obviously turning in his head. She glared at him. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

He snickered. "We got beer or wine."

The armed men who sat around them watched their exchange with dull eyes. "Water will do."

He took a few steps to the front and opened an ice chest. He returned with a bottle of wine. "No water," he growled.

*Idiot.* Well, at least she could rub a little wine on her knuckle, anything to get her baby to suck, anything to ease the pain. After quieting the child, she patted her back, murmuring, “Mommy’s here, sweetie. I know these men frighten you, and that your ears hurt. But somehow, we’ll get through this. I promise you’ll see your daddy again.” Hugging her baby girl tight, she wished she could believe her own promise.

\* \* \* \*

With an anguished heart, Matt drew the three FBI men together in the moonlit pasture. “Stop that other plane from taking off,” he told them. “Luke and I will ground the chopper.”

“I want to go with you,” Ramon said. “Noble and Phillips can disable the plane without my help. I’m good with choppers.”

Matt hesitated, and then nodded.

By the time Matt, Luke, and Ramon returned to the ranch compound, Alfonso and some of the vaqueros had already seized the chopper and had tied up Paulo Santina and Webb Viceman. The other three of the chopper crew had been killed in the crossfire.

Using his good arm, Matt grabbed Santina by the neck. “Where are they taking Molly and the baby?”

“I do not know anything, Señor. I am only the pilot.”

“Let me beat it out of him,” Luke said. “I think he’s the polecat who shot off the top of my ear.”

Right now, Luke couldn’t beat his way out of a paper bag. Matt leveled a menacing look first at Santina, then at Viceman. “I have something more deadly in mind for these two if they don’t start talking fast.”

Viceman spat in Matt’s face.

Santina sneered. “My sentiments exactly, Señor.”

“Okay,” Matt said, “we’ll do this the hard way.” He checked the men’s bindings. “Load these bastards into the chopper. We’re going for a ride.”

Matt studied his vaqueros and handpicked a couple of ex-marines to go with him. “Anyone want to back out? It’ll be dangerous. And not by the book.”

In answer, without hesitation, they climbed into the helicopter.

“I need a pilot, too.” Matt could fly the chopper, but he had another job in mind for himself. Luke had a pilot’s license, too. But he wanted him to stay behind.

"I can fly this," Ramon said.

"Then rev 'er up."

Ramon climbed inside and started the chopper. Propellers whipped the air, blew dust in rolling gusts.

"I'm going, too, bro." Luke didn't wait for agreement. He climbed into the chopper behind the other volunteers.

His brother needed a doctor, not another fight, and Matt needed men who were strong, ruthless. But if he disqualified Luke, he'd have to disqualify himself. And there was no way in hell he would do that.

With his hair blowing in the wind, Matt paused before closing the chopper door and asked Alfonso, "Are my folks okay?"

"Si, but mad as hell. Tita and Roberto are with them now."

Matt waved his thanks, then slammed the door closed and gave a thumbs-up sign to Ramon. Once in the sky, Matt went into a huddle with a couple of his strongest men and whispered what he wanted them to do. Then, in a loud voice, he told them to blindfold Viceman and Santina. "Okay, slimeballs," Matt said. "Your choice. Talk or fly."

"You cannot push us out the door, Señor," Santina said. "You are an agent of the government, not a killer."

"Right now," Matt growled, "I'm just a cowboy who wants his daughter back."

Santina swallowed. "I—"

"Don't spill anything," Viceman shouted. "Or I'll kill you myself."

"Sorry you feel that way." Matt nodded to one of his burly vaqueros and the man hustled Viceman into position. Viceman stiffened, trying to make himself dead weight. Matt yanked the door open, and air rushed in. He stuffed a cloth into Viceman's mouth. "Tread air, maggot."

Matt stuck his head out the door and made a cry—loud at first, then fading, to simulate the scream of a falling man, counting on Santina believing he'd pushed Viceman out of the chopper.

Sweat rolled off Santina's face.

"Okay, your turn, Santina."

"Wait! Wait! I will tell you! They have taken the *Señorita* to a ranch just over the border into Mexico. Near Del Rio."

*God, Matt prayed, let us get there in time.*

\* \* \* \*

Beneath a Mexican sky blazing orange and gold, Sara Jane's hungry wail cut the early morning air. Molly patted the infant's back. Claudio gripped Molly's arm and hurried her across the dusty, weedy runway toward two Jeeps where men in camouflage jumpsuits waited. In one Jeep, a powerfully built passenger sat in the back seat. He'd have been rather handsome if it wasn't for his dark, evil eyes.

*Those eyes! Del Fuego!*

Molly's pulse pounded in her ears. Matt had tried so hard to keep her and her baby out of this monster's clutches. Thoughts of Matt gave her courage. "My baby needs food."

Del Fuego smoothed his thick black hair with blunt fingers. "I see your ordeal has not knocked the spunk out of you, Señorita." His heavily accented tone reflected a mixture of admiration and hatred. "Fear not. Your child will receive everything she needs. I have a nurse waiting to care for her." He paused. "Your health, however, is quite a different matter." He patted the seat beside him. "Come, my dear, join me and we will discuss your fate."

One of the crew vaulted into the passenger seat next to the driver. Claudio opened the back door. Holding her baby close, Molly struggled to climb inside. Before comfortably seated, Claudio followed, jostling her against Del Fuego.

Del Fuego reached down into a satchel lying between his boots. Molly expected him to withdraw a gun. Instead, he handed her a bottle of milk. "This should stop your baby's tears for now," he said with contemptible graciousness.

She unscrewed the lid and smelled the milk.

"My, but you're suspicious," Del Fuego said.

She shrugged and slipped the nipple between her baby's lips. Sara Jane sucked hungrily. "Thank you," Molly muttered.

"It's not free," Del Fuego crooned. "You will pay a high price for that milk."

Molly had an urge to thrust the bottle back at him, but she wouldn't deprive her baby.

The other men who had been on the plane with her climbed into the first Jeep, and the vehicle moved ahead. Del Fuego motioned for his driver to go. Molly coughed as the wheels of the two Jeeps kicked up dust.

She swallowed to clear the dryness out of her throat. "What do you want from me?" As if she didn't know.

“The coins. I want them back.”

Molly lifted her chin, even though it trembled. “Is that all?” She hated the waver in her voice.

“Where are they?”

“At Matt’s ranch, of course. Your men didn’t exactly give me time to pack a bag.”

Del Fuego glared at Claudio. “Why didn’t you get the coins when you grabbed her?”

“*Mucho* security and firepower. We were lucky to get out with the *niña* and the Señorita.”

Molly looked up at Del Fuego. “I’ll be glad to go back and get them,” she said sweetly, fighting the tremor in her voice.

“Most humorous, Señorita. Tell me where they are. My inside man will get them.”

Molly gulped. Inside man? Ramon? But it couldn’t be. He was FBI. Or was he a double agent?

Del Fuego’s two-Jeep caravan drove up a long dirt road lined with rusty, sagging barbed wire fences. In the pastures, cows whose ribs poked through their skin stood, ready for a breeze to blow them away. The road curved, and the caravan entered a compound of dilapidated buildings. Half the barn roof had collapsed.

They stopped in front of a wind-worn, rambling wooden frame ranch house that looked only slightly better than the barn. Off-center to the left was a wide walkway to an inner courtyard. The wrought iron double gate hung open on sagging hinges. Neglect had stolen any charm the place might have once had.

“This is home,” Del Fuego said, gesturing with a wide, gallant sweep.

“Did a rich uncle die and leave you all this?” she quipped. “What happened to your fancy villa? IRS foreclose on you?”

“Your humor amuses me,” Del Fuego said. “You are either very courageous or incredibly stupid, my dear.” He laughed. “We shall find out which it is.”

The taunting and deceptive gentleness in his tone sent chills up her spine.

A husky, silver-haired older woman came down the front steps and stepped with vigor over the missing one. She was medium height and solid muscle. She wiped her brawny hands on her white uniform and reached for Molly’s baby.

“This is Dañoso,” Del Fuego said. “She will care for your *niña*.”

Panic rose in Molly. She clutched her infant to her breasts. "I want to keep my baby with me."

"Not advisable, my dear," Del Fuego crooned. "You and I have unfinished business."

She took a calming breath. "My baby and I stay together! And that's not negotiable!"

Fire flashed in Del Fuego's eyes.

Molly turned to the woman and forced an accommodating smile. "I'm so happy to meet you, Dañoso." Molly was amazed how composed she sounded. "Would you please get us some food and diapers?"

The woman's face remained stern.

"Dañoso will be happy to provide those things for your niña. But you won't be there. And that's not negotiable." He pried the baby from Molly and handed her to Dañoso. Sara Jane began to cry.

"Oh, please. Don't separate us. She's so frightened."

Del Fuego waved Dañoso away, and she quickly disappeared into the house with the baby.

"Take this *gringa* to my den," he told Claudio in Spanish.

Claudio yanked Molly from the Jeep so hard that, for a moment, she thought he'd dislocated her shoulder. He gripped her arm and hustled her into the house.

The peeling, rust-smeared walls smelled like a slaughter house. She shivered. Maybe that red stuff wasn't rust. Sagging wood floors creaked and threatened to collapse with each step. Claudio shoved her into the den with such force she fell to her knees.

Molly struggled to her feet. Del Fuego's shadow fell across her. He kicked out and knocked her to her knees again. "My patience has ended," he said. "Tell me exactly where my coins are. And if they are not where you say, you will die."

"Wh . . . what about my baby?"

Del Fuego glanced at his expensive wristwatch. "In about an hour, Claudio and Dañoso will board the plane again and take her far away to her new parents. People who want her so much that they are willing to pay two hundred thousand American dollars for her."

Molly's heart tightened with fear. "You want money? I'll get it for you." *Matt, they're going to sell our baby.*

"I want my coins." His voice was flat, deadly.

There was no more stalling. She had to make up something. Quick.



\* \* \* \*

Matt sat in the chopper's copilot seat next to Ramon and, studying the map, tried to decide where to land. He'd contacted FBI headquarters for approval and support, and then called the Laughlin Air Force Base commander. Once the commander understood that Molly was a key federal witness, he had agreed to provide backup. Waiting for his signal, three military helicopters flew formation behind him.

*Hang on, Molly, hang on.*

Ramon raised his voice. "Need a decision. Soon."

"I need a crystal ball." Matt had to shout over the engine noise and thrashing air to make himself heard.

"I was stationed at Laughlin," Ramon said. "Traveled back and forth across the line regularly. I know the area between the borders well. I think I know which ranch Santana was talking about. If I'm right, I can tell you where to land unseen."

"Good," Matt said. "Where?"

Ramon pointed to the map. "There's a small ranch about in this area," he said, making a circle with his index finger, "and a grove of mesquite trees here, then some sand dunes. We can set down on the southern side of those dunes."

"Is that the only ranch in the area?"

"No," Ramon said. "But it's the closest to the city of Del Rio. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Maybe." Matt jabbed a spot about twenty-five miles southwest. "Santana claimed it was closer to this location." Matt rose from his seat. "I'll see what he has to say."

Ramon shouted over his shoulder. "What makes you think he won't lie?"

"Because he's still not sure if I'll really throw him out the door."

Ramon frowned. "We're almost there—I need a decision in the next few minutes."

"Don't do anything until I tell you," Matt said.

Matt talked to Santana, and he swore he hadn't lied. Matt's pulse pounded in his ears with the steady rhythm of a ticking clock. Who was wrong—Santana or Ramon? It had been years since Ramon was stationed at Laughlin.

Matt slid back into the copilot's seat.

"Which is it?" Ramon asked.

Matt rubbed his jaw and studied the map again. He could hit both places. But if the first one was the wrong one, the time lost could make the difference between life and death for Molly and Sara Jane.

\* \* \* \*

From the desk, Del Fuego picked up a letter opener designed like a dagger. It was the only thing in the house that looked shiny and well cared for. The cast iron handle, embedded with ornate gold threads, narrowed to a sterling silver blade that glistened menacingly in the morning light. He touched the tip to Molly's chin. The metal was cold. She tried not to flinch as the point pricked her flesh.

He brought the blade close to her eyes to show her the bead of blood. "I'm waiting," he said.

Stomach tied in knots, Molly conjured up the first thing that came to mind. "They're in the lining of my packed suitcase."

"Packed suitcase?"

"We were going away before . . . before you messed up our plans."

He arched a black eyebrow. "And exactly where is this suitcase?"

"With the other bags in the nursery." She looked directly, unflinchingly, into Del Fuego's dark eyes—eyes as deadly as a pit of rattlesnakes. "Mine is the smallest one."

"It will not take long to verify this," he said, placing the letter opener back on the desk.

Molly knew that. If he really had an inside man at the ranch, a phone call would end her bluff.

Del Fuego shoved her into a leather swivel chair by the desk and tied her hands behind the back of the chair. Her arms didn't reach around to the back, so he was forced to leave a wide length of rope between her wrists. He tied her ankles together, and then stared at her for a moment. "I shall return soon, Señorita. Count on it."

Molly heard the click of the lock as he left the den. How long did she have—seconds, minutes, an hour at the most? All this trouble because she'd made one gigantic mistake—the secret phone call in Matt's barn office. But she couldn't keep berating herself for that. It was a mistake, yes, but what was done was done. Nothing could turn back the clock now. She just had to forgive herself and not give up hope.

She studied her surroundings. The den, with its sagging wood floors and dirty, faded yellow walls, was decorated in discarded military surplus. The olive green metal desk and matching filing cabinet were rusty and scarred. An open double-hung window led to the inner courtyard.

The clock was ticking. *Think!* If only she could get her bindings up over the back of the chair. She bent forward as far as possible while lifting her arms. She got hung up on the chair's arms. *Damn.*

She tried again. Sweat dripped from her brow and into her eyes. *For Sara Jane—lift!* Her arms ached, her shoulders felt as if they'd dislocate any second now, and the skin on her wrists was being rubbed raw, but there was no time to think of herself. Soon, Sara Jane would be gone. Tears of frustration and pain mixed with the perspiration. *Almost there . . . just a little higher . . .*

Molly sighed in relief as her arms cleared the back of the chair. Her gaze swept the desk. The letter opener lay on the far side. She knew how sharp the tip was, but would it cut rope?

Molly struggled to her feet and hoisted her hips onto the desk. Wriggling, she scooted toward the gleaming blade. An empty metal in-basket fell to the floor with a clang. She froze and prayed no one had heard the noise. After a moment, she continued her journey. She captured the letter opener in her fingers. Bending her wrists, she sawed at the ropes.

Slowly, the rope began to shred. Thank God, the rope was as old as the desk. She sliced away at the cord until it gave enough to slip her wrists out. She untied her feet. *Now what?* She slipped the letter opener and a length of rope into her pocket. It would be nice to have a plan, but she'd have to play this one moment at a time.

Molly slipped out the open window and dropped silently into the courtyard. Hugging the outside wall of the house, she passed beneath the shade of the twisted elm tree and stepped over cracked and broken adobe tiles. Now, to find her baby.

Voices of men speaking in Spanish came from the front of the house. She peered around a corner. A group of Del Fuego's men was on the front porch drinking beer. She didn't see Claudio. Was he guarding her baby? And where was Del Fuego?

She peered into windows until she found the kitchen. Through the open window, she saw her baby in a high chair. Dañoso sat next to Sara Jane feeding her applesauce from a jar. The woman was singing the sentimental song "*Estoy Sentado*" along with the radio. Her melancholy voice didn't match her tough demeanor. Claudio's whereabouts still bothered Molly—she'd bet he was nearby. Her baby would be gone in an hour. She had to chance a rescue.

With men on the porch, and Claudio's and Del Fuego's whereabouts unknown, there was just one way in—through the window. There was no margin for error.

Molly inhaled deeply to calm herself. The woman wouldn't cooperate. She'd have to go in hard and fast with a minimum of noise. She grabbed up a loose adobe tile and threw it at Dañoso's head, a direct hit. The radio drowned out Dañoso's gasp. A stain of blood appeared on her forehead. Her eyes widened, and she touched her head. Molly charged through the window before the woman could recover. She thrust the letter opener to the woman's neck. "*Silencia,*" she growled.

She stuffed a dishcloth into Dañosa's mouth. A fine stream of blood from the gash trickled down the side of the woman's face. "Hands behind your back." Dañosa obeyed. Molly bound Dañosa with the length of rope she'd brought with her.

She glanced into the diaper bag on the table and found what she expected—food, water, diapers. She slung the bag over her shoulder, grabbed her baby from the high chair, and climbed back through the open window. Behind her, she heard the door to the kitchen open and Claudio shout an alarm.

## Chapter Thirteen

Damn. Why did Claudio have to show up just then? She needed a head start on those men. Carrying the extra burden of the bag and her child, they'd catch her in no time.

Holding her baby close, Molly headed for the open wrought iron gates leading from the courtyard. Even as she ran, her thoughts raced ahead. She'd never be able to outrun them. She must find a place to hide and lay low until dark.

Molly glanced down. Sara Jane hadn't let out a peep. Had they drugged her baby? Or was she scared silent? "Good baby," Molly whispered.

She left the courtyard full of hope. Her plan had sounded workable in theory, but beyond the house on the unguarded side there were no buildings, no trees, just open pasture. Her heart sank. If she headed toward the vehicles and barns, the guards would see her. She had to flee through the pasture.

The bright sun beat down on the open land. Where could she hide? In the distance, there was an abandoned barn. But how far away? Half a mile? More? She needed something closer, even a dip in the land, something deep enough to hide them, like a drainage ditch.

Her muscles burned and her breath came in ragged gasps, but at least she was putting some distance between herself and the ranch house. She tripped over stones and into small holes, but she didn't fall. She had to keep going.

Sara Jane's silence felt odd, eerie. Behind her, she heard the faraway thud of booted footsteps on the dry packed earth and heard Claudio's distant, sing-song shout, "There's no place to hide, Señorita."

"Eat my dust," she said under her breath. Claudio and the six armed men with him couldn't hear her tough words, but their strength fueled her determination.

She ran as fast as she could, but her lead on them was shrinking. Carrying both Sara Jane and the bag strained her back and slowed her, but her baby would need food and water.

A motor revved to life. *Oh, God. Others were joining the chase.* Would they drive out into the pasture, or follow the road? It didn't matter. There was no escape. If only she could have waited for nightfall to get away, but by then, her baby would have been gone.

It took every ounce of Molly's strength to put one foot in front of the other, but she kept going. They'd have to catch her. She wouldn't stop, wouldn't give up. She focused on the open space ahead and thought of Matt. *Where are you when I need you?* But he didn't even know where she was.

Bullets zinged around her. She felt one whistle past her ear. She had hoped that they wouldn't shoot because of the baby. God, they could kill her baby!

A burst of strength exploded in her, and then she felt the bullet slam into her shoulder. The impact knocked Molly to her knees and sent a searing heat down to her fingertips. She held tight to her baby, protecting her. The diaper bag fell. She left it, struggled to her feet, and stumbled on. "Mommy will never give up, sweetie," she rambled in shock. "The only way they'll take you from me is to kill me." She laughed a little hysterically. "And another bullet might do it."

\* \* \* \*

Five helicopters flew low over the pasture. From the lead craft, Matt pointed to the figure in the familiar red shirt running across the wheat-colored pasture. "It's Molly!" he told Ramon. "Set down between her and those men chasing her."

When Matt's chopper touched ground, he ran to meet Molly. "You're here," she gasped.

He wanted to kiss her, hold her, never let her go. Sounds of gunfire blasted around them. He had to get them to safety.

Air Force choppers landed nearby. Combat troops and armed vaqueros charged past Matt and Molly, shooting and forcing back Del Fuego's men.

Matt took Sara Jane. His Sunshine felt so tiny. He wrapped his other arm around Molly. She winced. He felt something warm and sticky on his hands. "You're hurt!"

She mumbled something. Nearly carrying Molly, he headed for the chopper. Luke met them halfway and took his niece. "Thanks, bro," Matt said.

Molly kept stumbling. Just as they got to the chopper, she collapsed. Blood was seeping through her sleeve, dripping from her arm. Fighting panic, Matt swept her into the helicopter. "Get a medic!"

He knew there was one among the AF troops. He cradled Molly in his arms as her blood seeped through his shirt. *Don't die*. He clung to hope, soothed by the rhythm of her breathing and the beat of her heart against his chest.

Molly stirred. "Our baby?" she asked weakly.

Matt smoothed a tress from her brow. "She's fine. Just relax. I'll take care of both of you." Guilt washed over him. So far, he'd done a lousy job of that.

Ramon squatted next to them with the medical kit. "Let me help. Get her shirt off. We have to stop the bleeding."

Molly's face went sheet white. "What's he doing here?" she asked with a tremor in her voice.

"He's our pilot. It's okay. You're safe."

“No. No.” Her eyes were wild. “Get him away! Del Fuego said he had an inside man at the ranch—”

“Señorita, it’s not me. I’m with the FBI.”

Matt gestured with his head. “Back off, Ramon. You bother her. Get a medic.”

Ramon hopped out of the chopper and took off at a run.

Matt eased Molly’s shirt off to get to the wound. The bullet entry was from the back. He gently rolled her to her side. “Gimme a belt,” he called out. Someone slapped one in his hand. He wrapped it under Molly’s arm, adjusted it between the wound and her heart and yanked it tight.

She groaned. Matt prayed she would be all right, promising anything, everything. *Where the hell was that medic?*

Holding Sara Jane in one arm, Luke handed him a blanket. “Molly’s probably in shock. Might want to cover her with this.”

Matt lightly draped her, leaving access to the wound. “You’re going to be fine. Help’s on the way.” She moaned, her eyelids closed tight.

It was taking too long. Gunfire echoed in the distance. AF troops had pushed Del Fuego’s men into the ranch house and had surrounded the place. How would Ramon find a medic in that chaos?

The bleeding wouldn’t stop. Matt had never felt so helpless.

At last, Ramon came back. He brought a GI who looked about eighteen. Matt wanted a qualified medic, and Ramon brought him some kid still wet behind the ears.

“I’m a medic,” the GI said and motioned Matt to the sidelines. Matt bristled, but the guy’s skilled movements reassured him. The medic tightened the tourniquet and stopped the bleeding. He recited Molly’s vitals to another GI. “Call ahead to Del Rio Memorial,” he ordered. “Tell them we’re bringing in a gunshot victim, female, late twenties. Bullet’s lodged in her shoulder. Clean entry—shattered bone.” He paused and leveled a look at Matt. “Get her to emergency now!”

“Head for Del Rio,” Matt told Ramon.

“One of us should stay and secure the prisoners,” Ramon said. “It’s the FBI’s responsibility.”

Matt could pilot the chopper himself, but that would mean leaving Molly’s side. Luke could fly a chopper, and he had a license, but what about leaving Ramon in charge of Del Fuego?

Giving up control set Matt's teeth on edge, but nothing mattered as much as Molly. "Meet you at Laughlin," he told Ramon. Ramon gave a thumbs-up gesture and jumped out of the chopper.

Matt looked up at Luke and reached out his arms. "Give me the baby. You're the new pilot. Fly us to Del Rio fast. And no fancy stuff."

Matt glanced outside. His vaqueros and the troops from Laughlin were herding a group of men toward them from the ranch house at gunpoint, including Del Fuego. It was Matt's responsibility to see that Del Fuego didn't escape—that he was locked away. He'd been in on this case from the beginning and wanted to see it through to the end. He looked down at Molly. But none of that mattered anymore.

\* \* \* \*

Twenty minutes later at the emergency room, the staff whisked Molly away to surgery. A burly male nurse sent Matt and Luke to a waiting room. Matt paced, holding Sara Jane. He glanced over at Luke slouched on a couch. His brother's eyes drooped as though he was barely conscious. "Are you okay, Luke?"

"I could use some more of them pain pills."

Matt could use some himself. His arm was swelling and throbbed with pain. "I'll get someone to take a look at you. Maybe they'll give you something."

He showed his badge to a sweet-faced nurse with tired eyes, explained about the gun battle, and asked if someone could check Luke's ear. After she took Luke to an examining room, Matt tried to relax. It was impossible. What was happening with Molly?

Sara Jane was so still in his arms. Not at all like his usually vocal Sunshine. He approached the nurse again. She was going to get tired of him, but this was important. "I think I have a sick baby here. Can someone examine her?"

"Dr. Feldman always has time for babies," she said. "I'll get him."

When Feldman came out, Matt explained that the baby had been kidnapped twice and that this last time, her mother had been shot with the infant in her arms. "She hasn't made a peep since we rescued her. She just watches everything with wide, dazed eyes. Could she be in shock?"

"Let's take a look," Feldman said, leading Matt into a curtained-off area.

Matt laid Sara Jane down on the examining table. He kept a hand on her shoulder. His throat was dry. "She's been through so much and with her mother in surgery—"

"You a relative?"



Matt forced his answer past the lump in his throat. "I'm her father." He blinked away a sudden rush of tears.

"Relax, if you can. If you're tense, she'll pick up on it and be frightened."

Dr. Feldman took her vitals then flashed a small light into Sara Jane's eyes. "I think someone drugged this baby." He drew some blood. She didn't even cry. "I'll put a rush on this."

The doctor came back within twenty minutes. "I was right. She's been drugged," he said. "They used a Mexican street drug called Paralizar."

Matt cursed under his breath. How could someone do this to a defenseless baby, to his precious Sunshine? He wanted to smash Del Fuego's face into unrecognizable pulp. He had no doubt that bastard was the one responsible. "Can you help her?"

"It should wear off by tomorrow. She's lucky. One milligram more could have killed someone so small. I'd like to monitor her through the night."

Matt rubbed his throbbing arm. "I want to stay with her."

Dr. Feldman nodded. Matt held Sara Jane in his arms until she went to sleep. He looked at his watch. By now, Molly should be out of surgery. With reluctance, he left the baby in the nursery under the care of a nurse.

Matt found Molly asleep in the surgery recovery room looking pale against the blue sheet. A cardiac monitor beeped overhead, as it tracked the rhythm of her heart. It was strong, steady—reassuring.

The emergency room doctor came into the tiny curtained area and glared at him. "Who let you in here?" Without waiting for an answer she said, "You'll have to wait in the waiting room."

He flashed his badge.

"Very impressive, Agent Ryan," she said. "Now wait outside."

"I'm her husband," he said, willing to use any means to stay.

The doctor sighed, and then said in a more gentle tone. "You can stay, but only for a few minutes."

"Thanks." He held Molly's limp hand and said reassuring things just in case she could hear him. After about five minutes, the doctor returned and ousted him from the enclosure. "I need space to work," she said.

"I'll be right outside the curtain." He couldn't leave until he knew Molly would be all right.

He called on his cell phone and learned that the Air Force choppers had landed at Laughlin with his prisoners. He should be there to take charge of them; this was still his case. But Molly came first. Matt then called FBI headquarters to arrange for transfer of the prisoners to Dallas.

Ramon had already taken care of it and was in the military police cell block questioning Del Fuego's men. *Damn it*, Matt thought. That was his job, and he wasn't doing it. He took a deep breath. As much as he'd like to, he couldn't control everything. The job was getting done, and he was where he belonged—with Molly.

When the feisty female doctor left the curtained area, he slipped back inside.

\* \* \* \*

"Molly, honey, you're going to be fine."

Matt's voice reached Molly as if from a great distance, drawing her from the darkness. She tried to squeeze the familiar callused hand holding hers. Oxygen hissed in her nostrils. She heard a jumble of beeps and unfamiliar voices. She slowly opened her eyes to blazing light, and then shut them again.

In a no-nonsense attitude, a woman said, "Step aside, Mr. Ryan." Her tone softened. "Are you in pain, Molly?"

Molly forced her eyes open. She felt no pain, only exhaustion. And troubled . . . about what?

"Is she okay?" Matt asked, tension riding in his words.

"Please," the woman with a stethoscope around her neck insisted. "Wait over there out of the way. We'll talk when I'm through." Curtain rings raked across a metal pole. The woman's voice gentled again. "I'm Doctor Rosemoor, Molly. You're in the surgery recovery room."

Molly wanted to ask something but couldn't bring it forward. The signals her brain was sending were incomplete, confusing. She closed her eyes and drifted away. . . Hollow voices came and went, asking questions, hands probing, poking.

"Molly, Molly . . ."

The voice was low, anxious. A face locked into focus, haggard, unshaven. "Matt . . ." She reached up to touch him, but a tangle of plastic tubes trapped her wrist. She let her hand fall back to the sheet.

Matt bent and gently lifted her fingers and kissed the tips. "Hi, little darlin'." His voice broke. He swallowed. "Doc says you're fine. Bullet's out—no complications."

*Bullet? Oh, that's right. I was shot.* She'd been running across the pasture with Del Fuego's men after her. She'd felt the force of the bullet, but kept going, protecting her baby . . . *Oh, God.* "Sara Jane . . . is she all right?"

Matt hesitated. “Don’t worry. She’s sleeping.”

“I want to see her. Now.”

His eyes darkened. He kissed Molly’s fingers again. “As soon as you’re out of recovery.” The distress in his voice troubled her.

“Mr. Ryan, you must wait outside,” the doctor insisted. Nurses joined the doctor, changing IV bottles, disconnecting wires. They spoke in hushed tones.

“What’s wrong?” Molly asked.

“Everything’s fine,” the doctor said. “Just relax.”

“My baby?” Molly couldn’t stem her rising panic.

“She’s fine. Calm down,” Dr. Rosemoor told her. A nurse buried the tip of a needle into Molly’s arm.

“I don’t want to sleep. I want to see my baby.”

A blurry fog crept over Molly, its murky fingers pulling her into darkness. Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong.

\* \* \* \*

Matt’s arm throbbed, swelled. It had been giving him trouble for the past couple of hours, but he ignored it. He refused to leave Molly’s hospital room. He stayed by her bed holding her hand, listening to her breathing, willing her to wake up. Whatever pain medication the nurse had given her had knocked her out from late afternoon into night. Several times, she had called out for their baby—but not for him.

No wonder. He’d failed to stop Del Fuego’s men from whisking her away from the ranch, failed to stop one of them from shooting her, failed to keep someone from drugging their child. In the end, he’d saved them, but what torture had they been forced to endure? “I’m sorry, Molly, so sorry.”

Sweat poured from Matt’s brow and soaked his clothes. His throat felt dry, but when he struggled up to get a glass of water, his knees buckled and he fell to the floor. Blackness claimed him.

He awoke forty-eight hours later and learned his gunshot wound had become infected. Antibiotics had saved him. He was in a bed next to his brother. Big strong men. Taken down by a few microbes.

“I want to see Molly and my baby,” Matt told the doctor. He tried to push his way through a snarl of tubes and gadgets and get out of bed.

Dr. Rosemoor forced him back down with a firm hand. "Relax. They're both fine. FBI agents took them into protective custody and transferred them to a hospital in Dallas."

Matt felt his world tilt. "No," he groaned.

\* \* \* \*

Luke was released first, and Matt the following day. Del Fuego's helicopter had been impounded by the FBI, so Matt made other arrangements for transportation.

"I'm going to Dallas," he told Luke.

"Why?"

"Can't go home without seeing Molly and Sara Jane."

"How come the Feds moved 'em?"

"Wanted to get them closer to the Dallas headquarters for their own convenience, and to get her away from me." Matt stroked his jaw. "Can you get back to the ranch on your own?"

"Could. But I'm going with you, bro."

Matt was glad for the company. They rented a car and took turns driving. Neither of them said much on the trip, but just having his brother with him felt damned good.

In Dallas, Matt left Luke to wait in the car and charged into the FBI office. He slammed his fist down on his chief's desk. "I checked the Dallas hospitals. No sign of Molly. Is she still critical? What about my baby?"

"They're both fine."

"I want to see them!" Matt growled.

"Not a good idea," his chief said in a monotone.

Chief Noel Kelly was ruddy-faced and an Irishman through and through. At social gatherings, he was boisterous and blustery, and on the job he was pigheaded and single-minded. When Noel was straight with him, Matt could overlook his shortcomings. But this time the man had stepped over the line. "What's with all the underhanded moves?"

Noel steeped his fingers and just stared at him.

"Damn it. You owe me an answer," Matt growled.

"You've lost focus," Noel said finally. "Become too scattered. Your family, the ranch. Sleeping with a witness." He paused. "She wasn't safe with you."

“She wasn’t safe with Clancy and Murphy. What makes you think those other three jokers can do better than me?”

“You harbored Del Fuego’s inside man on your ranch.”

“Harbored? Who?”

“Octavo Cruz.”

Matt couldn’t believe it. Octavo had been on the ranch for years. He’d had money problems last year when his wife developed cancer, but Matt had given his own personal guarantee on a loan for him, and Octavo had assured him that it solved his financial problems. If he were Del Fuego’s inside man, it would mean Octavo’s back was still against the wall and Del Fuego had been able to buy his loyalty.

Bile rose in Matt’s throat. Another betrayal—this time a trusted employee. “How do you know?”

“Ramon got his name from Santana.” Noel met Matt’s gaze. “We had to get Molly to a safe house right away. Santana said there were more of Del Fuego’s men on the loose with orders to shut her up. Permanent-like.”

Maybe Noel had done him a favor by keeping Molly away from the ranch. Matt’s stomach knotted. “Looks like I’ll have to clean house.”

“Already done. We picked up Octavo yesterday. He admitted everything.” Noel gave his glass ashtray a spin. “How are you feeling? I hear we almost lost you.” Matt heard a trace of concern in Noel’s voice.

“Okay. Just mad as hell.”

Noel bit off the end of a cigar then lit it. “I had no choice. You were out of commission, and our key witness was still in danger. We had to make her disappear until the trial. For her own good.”

Matt waved away the foul smoke. “Don’t pretend you give a damn about her.”

Noel frowned. “I care.”

“Where is she?”

“Classified. Even I don’t know where they’re holding her.”

“You’re lying. You always know where everyone is and what they’re doing. Even how many times a day they pee.”

“Don’t be bitter. You can see her after the trial.” Noel looked at his hands. “She doesn’t want to talk to you, you know. Any idea why?”

“Hell yes. She thinks I let her down again. Betrayed her. And keeping her from me is reinforcing that belief.”

“Go home until the trial. Rest, heal.” He gave a half smile. “Play cowboy. And let the wheels of justice turn. When it’s over, you can straighten out your love life.”

That’s just what he intended to do—if it wasn’t too late. “I want to get a message to her.”

Noel reached in his desk drawer and withdrew a sheet of plain paper and an envelope.

Matt grabbed it and scrawled: I’ll be waiting. Love, Matt. He sealed the envelope and returned it to Noel. “You’ll see that she gets this?”

“She’ll have it by nightfall.”

“I’ll count on it.” Matt rose and slammed out of the office without another word.

Luke waited in the rental car. “Bad news?” he asked as Matt slid behind the wheel.

“The chief won’t tell me where Molly is.”

“Shoot, I bet you can find her. You ain’t gonna take this little ol’ roadblock lying down, are you?”

“I don’t want to, but Noel brought up a good point. Del Fuego could still have henchmen running loose. If they tail me, I could lead them right to her. I can’t risk that.”

“Isn’t that the kind of thinkin’ that screwed things up before? You may be pushin’ your luck. Connie Lou said a woman can forgive a man once for runnin’ out on her. But never twice.”

Never twice. Maybe Connie Lou was right. He floored the gas pedal and left rubber on the pavement as he shot out of the parking lot. Matt sped toward Dallas Love Field Airport. Luke held on for dear life.

In the distance, the round top of the fifty-story Reunion Tower came into view. Matt had taken Molly to the revolving restaurant and kissed her on the observation deck. Her lips had been warm, velvety. Damn. He wanted to see her—to know she was all right. If it weren’t for the danger to her, he’d never let anyone keep them apart.

Molly might still be somewhere in Dallas, maybe less than a mile away. How would he get through this? Leaving her was like cutting out his heart. It was painful enough to let her go that first time, but now there was much more at stake—Molly and his little Sunshine.

“Maybe we should spend the night in town,” Luke said. “We’re both tired, still healing from our wounds—”

Matt wanted to stay, wanted to comb every inch of the city. “I gotta get back to the ranch and see for myself that Mom and Dad are okay.”

“Wouldn’t hurt none to wait until tomorrow, get a fresh start.”

“Forget it. I’ve already set things up.” He’d rented a plane to fly back to the ranch and hired a pilot to return it to Dallas.

“I know what’s goin’ on. You’re afraid if you hang around Dallas another day, you’ll go lookin’ for Molly. Ain’t that right?”

“Maybe.” He wouldn’t put her in jeopardy for his own selfish purposes.

“If I were you, I’d go for it.”

Matt glared at him. “You’re not me.”

The brothers boarded the Cessna in icy silence. The return-trip pilot settled himself in the cargo hold, and Matt and Luke took the pilot and copilot seats. After they were under way, Matt gave Luke a gentle poke in the ribs. “Sorry for being so short with you. But this is something I have to work out alone.”

“I’m here if you need me,” Luke said, and then he grabbed a small pillow to catch some shut-eye.

Matt tried to keep his attention on flying, but thoughts of Molly and his Sunshine ate at his concentration. They’d be all right. He had to believe that. All he had to do was stay away.

Forty-five minutes later, when he lowered the landing gear, he glanced out the window and drew a deep breath as the expanse of land spread before him. Home. Then, emptiness hit him like a physical blow. Molly wouldn’t be there.

Victoria and Gavin met them when they landed. They seemed unhurt and none the worse from their ordeal. “Are you okay?” Matt asked.

“Fit as a fiddle,” Victoria said.

Relief rushed through Matt. He hadn’t seen them since the attack on the ranch and had only talked to them once on the phone. “I’m sorry I had to go after the kidnappers before checking on you, but lives were on the line. Molly . . . my baby.”

“I know. I know. You said all that when you called. We were so worried—about all of you.” Victoria hugged Matt and Luke as if she never wanted to let go.

Gavin gave him a rough embrace, longer than his usual brief hug. Luke’s eyes widened when he got the same. The brothers weren’t surprised to get all the mushy affection from their

mom, but it floored them when it came from their dad. “I’m proud of you boys,” Gavin said. “You put up a great fight.”

Victoria beamed. “You didn’t let bullets stop you from saving our granddaughter. Imagine—my boys are heroes. Both of you.” She paused. “When are you going to bring Molly and the baby home where they belong?”

*Home where they belong.* Even his parents, who didn’t have a clue about the true depth of his feelings, knew Molly belonged here.

“The FBI has them under protective custody until the trial.”

“Why aren’t you with her?”

Matt explained the situation as if he understood and accepted it, which he did—but he didn’t have to like it.



## Chapter Fourteen

Molly remembered Matt at her side holding her hand. Then, he disappeared. She couldn't believe he'd released her to these agents without even discussing it with her. She wanted him to explain—wanted to give him the benefit of doubt. She waited until the other two agents left the room to approach Ed Noble, the friendliest of the three. "Can't you find anything good on the boob tube?" she quipped. She eased down on the couch next to him, careful not to jostle her healing shoulder.

"Waiting for the news," Ed said. "It'll be on in fifteen minutes. Is there something you'd like to watch?"

"Could we just talk?"

He flipped off the TV and faced her. "Any special subject?" he asked in a tense voice.

"Matt was shot. Did his wound heal all right?"

Ed snickered. "Nothing could keep Ryan down for long. Oh, that reminds me. He sent you a note." Ed pulled a folded envelope from his pocket and made a big production out of smoothing the folds.

Excitement surged through Molly. Unable to curb her impatience, she snatched it out of his hands. "Thanks."

She ripped the envelope open and stared at the sheet of paper inside. I'll be waiting. Love, Matt. Five measly words that explained zip. Disappointment washed over her.

"Don't look so crushed," Ed said. "He'll contact you after the trial."

Molly forced a smile and nodded. It was just like last time. Matt was there for her up to a point, and then ducked out.

Weeks passed. Her wound healed, and she began to feel like herself again—except more impatient, more restless. She paced a lot as the walls of one hotel room after another closed in on her. She knew once the trial was over she'd never want to see a hotel room or an FBI man again. Ramon, Ed, and Gordon were nice enough guys, but they wouldn't let her out of their sight for even a moment. She was cut off from the world—no phone calls, no letters. No Matt.

She made a determined effort not to think of Matt, but thoughts of him lurked constantly at the edge of her mind and made her miss him in spite of her vow to forget him.

Months passed, and Sara Jane grew to look more like her daddy every day. If Victoria and Gavin could see their granddaughter now, they would notice the resemblance. New fear plagued Molly. Gavin Ryan had once said he would fight to keep his grandchildren on the land. What if he decided to come after Sara Jane? Del Fuego's men could easily follow him.

God, being locked up like a prisoner was warping her mind. She shouldn't feel threatened by a helpless old man who wasn't even in good health. But were her fears so farfetched? Matt loved Sara Jane. If Gavin believed he could control Matt through the child . . .

She knew instinctively that she was off base, but she couldn't stop her thoughts. Cooped up like this, there wasn't much else to do except think.

Perhaps when the trial was over she'd take her baby and just disappear, make a new life far away from crime bosses and FBI men . . . and a certain FBI cowboy.

\* \* \* \*

Matt leaned against the rails of the corral next to Suzy, watching Roberto practice roping a calf. Suzy had a stopwatch in her hand. "He's a natural, isn't he, Uncle Matt?" Both Roberto and Suzy had started calling him uncle although there were no blood ties between them.

"He's pure lightning," Matt said, smiling at the idea of being a stand-in uncle to these kids.

Roberto dismounted and hog-tied the calf, binding three legs. When he threw his hands in the air, Suzy clicked the stopwatch. "Three nine!" she squealed.

Matt applauded, then left them to their fun. He couldn't hang around long, or they might sense his deep unhappiness. Let them enjoy every moment of their young romance. They sure as hell didn't need to know about his grown up troubles.

Work. That was the only thing that helped. He saw Alfonso heading his way leading Gold King and Arrowstar. "Ready?" Alfonso asked. Matt had promised to ride out to the east sector with him to inspect fences.

Matt nodded and mounted his quarter horse. They galloped out into the hot, windy morning and spoke in Spanish, the second language of the ranch, before lapsing into English. The arid, white day seemed to smother Matt and put him even more on edge.

"When's the trial, Señor Matt?"

"Starts in two weeks."

"Bueno. Get it behind you. You haven't been yourself since you returned."

Matt felt a surge of guilt. "I've relied on you too much, amigo?"

"Not enough. You've been driving yourself."

Matt hunched in the saddle as they inspected some of the more remote parts of his ranch they couldn't reach in a four-wheel drive. "Have to keep going or go nuts."

They repaired a windmill and some fencing, physical work that did little to engage Matt's mind. By the time they returned to the ranch, shadows had burrowed deep between the barn and ranch house.

"I'll head on home," Alfonso said. "See you in the morning."

Matt touched the brim of his Stetson in farewell. Gold King's weary steps quickened as they got closer to the barn and a trough of fresh hay. Matt welcomed his own weariness. Maybe he'd be so exhausted that he'd actually sleep for a change.

Horseshoes rang on the concrete floor as they rode into the stable—an empty sound. The barn reeked with hay dust and horse smells. Even the familiar earthy animal smells couldn't ease Matt's sense of loss or soothe his soul.

He dismounted and maneuvered Gold King into a stall. He patted his neck. "Good boy," he crooned. Matt unsaddled his horse and put the gear away in the tack room and placed the pads on hooks to air out. Then he picked up the currycomb and brushed down Gold King while the horse nosed at the hay Matt had laced with a half cup of oats as a treat. "Pretty good stuff, huh boy?"

He wondered if it was the same every day for Gold King as it was for him now—one day blending into the next, empty, meaningless. He wished he'd had the chance to tell Molly how brave she was. If she hadn't charged out into the pasture, he might not have found her in time. He never got to hear the story of how she'd escaped, or of how Del Fuego had treated her.

Secondhand news didn't cut it. The chief said Molly's wound had healed and Sara Jane hadn't suffered any aftereffects from the Mexican drug. Matt clenched his hands into fists. Because he might lead Del Fuego to Molly and the baby, he had to grit his teeth and live with Chief Noel's reassurances.

Matt left Gold King to his munching and wandered through the barn with a clipboard checking supplies. He entered the area where he kept the mechanical bull and ran his hand across the surface. He had swung Molly up and brought her into position. Warm desire swept over him just thinking about the feel of her buttocks and belly in his hands.

He climbed on the bull, grabbed the rope around the middle, and flicked the switch. The phony bull began to buck. His pelvis rocked, and the friction of his butt heated the same spot Molly's had. When she'd told him to turn the switch to high, he'd about busted his shirt snaps with pride. It was that kind of gutsiness that had saved her life. He shut down the machine and leaped off.

As though in a trance, he grabbed a blanket and climbed the ladder to the loft. He spread the cover over the hay and stretched out on it, while letting the memory of their lovemaking wash over him—the tangled limbs, the sweet sweat of their bodies mingled with the scents of hay and horses, the warmth of her lips, the heat in her gasping breath as they rode the climaxing wave of passion. Her soft little cry of fulfillment . . .

Then she'd fallen asleep in his arms. Was she sleeping now, dreaming of him? Maybe to her it would be a nightmare.

Matt heard Luke below talking to someone. Connie Lou? Or just his horse? Luke was a changed man. Spending a night in jail for Parker's murder had scared him sober. When he got out of the hospital, he'd checked back into Lone Star Retreat, finished the rehab program, and hadn't had a drink since. The sheriff dropped all charges against Luke after Santana snitched on Webb Viceman.

Luke had been lucky all around. His hearing hadn't been damaged, and the missing slice from the top of his ear wasn't too noticeable. Connie Lou said the minor disfigurement gave Luke a rugged look she found downright appealing. With his wife in his corner, Luke had come out of treatment more determined than ever to make things right between them, and it was working.

Matt envied him. Luke could go on with his life now. Matt doubted he could salvage things with Molly. The longer they were apart, the less likely she'd listen. If he could just talk to her for five minutes, just hold her. But when he weighed his need to see her against his need to protect her, protecting won hands down. He loved her and their baby too much to take the risk. Even at the expense of his heart.

\* \* \* \*

The California desert sun felt warm and wonderful on Molly's back. She dipped Sara Jane's tiny legs into the children's wading pool, and the toddler laughed, showing deep dimples. Under different circumstances, an all-expense-paid winter vacation in Palm Springs would be great. The food was top notch, the hotel one of the best in the area, and she had three attentive men constantly at her side, two of them not bad looking.

"You look especially fetching in that bikini," Edward Noble said with a wide grin as he sat down beside her.

She smiled. "Thanks." The compliment didn't mean much. In the last month, Ed had said that everything she wore was especially fetching. And Molly liked how he paid a lot of attention to Sara Jane. Talking to him helped pass the long days, but he was an FBI man, and no way would she fall for one of that breed again. "It cinched the sale when the clerk showed me that adorable matching outfit for Sara Jane."

"She looks cute as a button," Ed said.

Molly had purchased the flowered purple bathing suits at Diane's Desert Sportswear Shoppe earlier that morning. Although she'd had to shop in disguise, just the act of going into a store and buying play clothes made her feel, for a brief and deceptive moment, that her life was normal again. It was the first time her companions had allowed her near a store. They waited just inside the door with alert eyes and shifting feet like anxious husbands.

It might seem to onlookers that the men were a watchful trio of admirers. But—except for Ed—their attention was strictly duty. Several tanned beauties enjoying the hotel swimming

pool eyed her escorts with interest. Why not? They all looked good in their swim trunks, even skinny Ramon, probably because they worked out every morning.

She grinned at their out-of-place jackets. “Are navy-blue windbreakers and white towels around the neck the ‘in’ accessories for FBI men to wear poolside?”

Ed chuckled. “We don’t like to stand out in a crowd.”

Molly shook her head. “Well, you do,” she said. “Only a blind person wouldn’t notice the bulges of guns and holsters under those zipped-up garbs.”

Ed looked around to see if anyone had heard her. “Why don’t you use a megaphone, Molly? I think those blondes on the other side of the pool didn’t quite hear you.”

“Don’t be such a bear. No one heard me.” Molly dried Sara Jane and lavished a second coat of sunscreen on her. “Any news about the court date?”

“Should hear something by late tomorrow.”

Molly just wanted it to be over. Her guards moved their entourage every couple of weeks. They traveled from state to state, changed rental cars often. Sometimes, they stayed in nondescript fleabag motels, sometimes in medium-priced places, and, as a special treat for her birthday, this luxurious place. She’d had so many different names that she no longer bothered to learn them. She just answered to anything.

Her baby was safe. That was all that mattered.

“What’ll you do when this is all over?” Ed asked.

“I haven’t thought that far ahead.” But she had. Trying to decide what she really wanted had kept her awake nights, made her dream of Matt, of them together.

Ed finished the last of his iced tea and held his empty glass up to get the waiter’s attention. He met Molly’s gaze with serious eyes. “Better enjoy all this while you can. We leave tomorrow before dawn.”

Molly’s pulse quickened. “Routine? Or is there a problem?”

Ed glanced at the other two agents sitting under an umbrella at a nearby table. “I’m not supposed to say.”

He had his secrets and she had hers, but she couldn’t let him off the hook on this one. “Hey, this is our lives we’re dealing with here. How much danger are we in?”

Ed looked down at Sara Jane. “Our rear-shadow said some guys are tracking us—about a day behind.”

“Del Fuego’s men?”

“Probably. But we won’t let anything happen to you. Even if we have to move every day.”

Molly gave a nervous laugh. “I feel like a gypsy.”

“You’ve been a good sport about all this,” he said. “I know it’s hard to be away from family and everything you know.”

“Just keep my baby safe.”

“She’s our top priority, just like she is to you. Ramon told me how you carried her across the pasture. Even after you took a shot in the shoulder, you kept right on running, determined to stop them from selling your baby.”

“Any mother would do the same.” She’d learned just how single-minded and determined she could be when the stakes were high.

“Maybe any mother would want to. But how many could actually pull it off?”

“Okay, you buttered me up enough. You can have my dessert at dinner.”

Ed laughed. “You’re okay, kid.” He was looking at her as if he’d rather have her for dessert. She had to squelch this attraction quickly because she was starting to like him, too—and that bothered her.

“Have you heard from Agent Ryan?”

Ed lit a cigarette and blew out a puff of smoke. “Only indirectly. He’s back at the ranch and fully recovered from the infection.”

Her heart pounded. “What infection?”

Ed shook his head. “Damn, talking to you is like running through a blasted minefield.”

“Don’t clam up now, buddy.”

“You’re getting me in trouble here, lady.” He started to get up.

She grabbed his arm. “I think a tough guy like you can handle it. Come on. Show me that underneath that mechanical FBI facade lurks a real human being.”

He sighed. “Okay. Matt didn’t get proper medical care soon enough, and his bullet wound got infected. He was still hospitalized when we left.”

“Oh, God. I didn’t know.” *There might be other things they are keeping from me.* “Are you sure he’s all right?”

“Yeah. He’s tough as nails.”

Even nails could get badly bent. She had to find out for herself how he was. Her opportunity would come only if something distracted her protectors. She watched for that moment.

Finally one came. A guy grabbed the arm of one of the blondes by the pool. Another guy objected and the two men began to argue and push each other. A chair tipped over. Her protectors turned to see what was going on. This wasn't much of a distraction, but it might be the only chance she'd get.

Their poolside suite was nearby. Holding her toddler close to her chest, she slipped away. The agents would miss her within seconds. She'd have to hurry.

Molly put Sara Jane in the play pen by the couch and grabbed the phone. Many times over the months, she'd hoped for this opportunity. One of the bodyguards was always there to take the phone out of her grasp. Molly's hand trembled. The line rang repeatedly. "Come on, come on," she whispered.

Ramon stepped through the patio doors, his eyes flashing. "What the hell are you doing?" he growled, jabbing down the disconnect button. "If you thought you could slip away without us seeing you, you have a mighty low opinion of us."

"No. I just—"

"Damn it, we have enough to deal with without you sabotaging our mission."

"It was a safe call—Matt's private cell phone. He saved our lives. He was shot protecting us. Hospitalized. I feel I owe him a call at least."

"There are no safe calls! Del Fuego had an inside man at Matt's ranch. We got the guy, but there could be others." Ramon yanked the phone line from the wall. "For your baby's sake, you'll have to wait until after the trial to express your gratitude." He paused and met her gaze with a stony look. "I hate to hit below the belt, but Clancy and Murphy might still be alive if you hadn't made unauthorized calls." Ramon's voice deepened. "None of us wants to end up in the obituary column."

Molly closed her eyes as pain and guilt shot through her. She'd thought this time was different, safe, but maybe it wasn't. Would it ever be? She rubbed her forehead, fighting a headache. "You win. I'll stay away from phones." She owed the men risking their lives for her and Sara Jane that much. And more.

\* \* \* \*

"She and the baby are fine," the chief told Matt. "You don't need to call every flipping day. We've got three cautious men on the job."

Matt slammed the receiver down. He began to pace. What if Molly decided to disappear again after the trial? He couldn't risk that. He needed a plan. The phone rang before he could form one. It was a collect call from Santana.

“What kind of deal can I get for *primo* information, Señor?”

“What’ve you got?” Matt asked, trying to tamp down his impatience.

“Not so fast. I want a minimum sentence and cash to get out of the country.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“I need assurances, Señor.”

Matt drummed his fingers on his desk. “Spill it, or quit wasting my time.”

The line went silent. Seconds ticked by. Then Santana sighed and said, “Bueno. I’ll trust you. Two of our men are on Molly’s trail. But the Feds keep moving her.”

“Tell me something I don’t already know.”

“Patience, Señor. Since they can’t find her on the road, the hit is planned for the first morning of the trial.”

Matt’s stomach knotted. “I need names, descriptions.”

“Rico Cardosa and Hermano Garcia.” Santana gave descriptions that matched half the Mexican population.

“Do these guys have records?”

“Long as a life sentence.”

*Good.* There’d be pictures on file. He asked Santana a half-dozen questions about the men’s background and ended with, “If you get an update on their plans, or if there are any changes, call me immediately.”

Matt punched in his chief’s number and told him about the planned hit. “Molly’s guards need to be on high alert.”

“They already are. That’s why those bastards haven’t been able to find her.”

Matt felt frustration building in him like pressure in an oil well about to blow. “Del Fuego doesn’t want her to testify, and he isn’t giving up.”

“I’ll run a check and put out an APB,” the chief said. “If we can find Cardosa and Garcia, we’ll pick them up.”

“What if you can’t find them?”



“We’ll handle it, Matt. I know sitting on the sidelines is rough, but it’s for the best. Now relax. We’ve got top men on the job.”

Matt hung up, not at all confident about Molly’s protectors. He swung around in his chair and faced his computer. He searched FBI files and came up with pictures and every address Rico and Hermano ever had. Then, he did a crime profile inquiry. Hermano’s file wasn’t as long as Rico’s, nor were his offenses as violent. Rico had been accused of a dozen murders—one was the month-old baby of his live-in girlfriend.

Matt rubbed his tight neck muscles. He had seven days before the trial to find these guys. They weren’t using credit cards, at least not their own, and they weren’t renting cars, or staying in hotels under their own names.

The week went by without turning up anything. Tomorrow, the trial began. He had hired some guys to watch the Dallas hotels close to the courthouse. He figured the Feds would secure Molly in one of them for convenience. By evening, he knew where she was—and the exact room.

Matt showed Rico’s and Hermano’s pictures to the hotel staff. One of the maids thought she’d seen Rico on the fourth floor in room 498, but when Matt talked to the guest, he found it wasn’t him. Matt examined the registry for guys traveling alone and in doubles. There were lots of them, but none were the guys he was looking for.

He called his chief. “I found Molly and the baby,” he said. “And if I can find them so can Rico and Hermano.” He inhaled deeply to calm his escalating nerves. “Look, I know this hit is going down. I want Molly and my baby moved tonight.”

“Can’t be done. Convention in town. Hotels are full.”

“Put them up in someone’s house. In a church.”

“Tight security is set up where they are. Moving them will expose them to a hit and might get them killed.”

“Damn it to hell, Noel, you’re making a big mistake.” Matt slammed down the phone and called Molly’s room.

The line was busy. Damn. He waited about five minutes and tried again.

Ed wouldn’t let him talk to her. “You know the rules,” he said.

“Expect trouble between now and the time she walks into the court room in the morning,” Matt said, trying to keep the panic out of his voice.

“The chief called about your concerns,” Ed said with resentment in his tone, “and we’re on top of it. We’ve kept her safe so far. Just relax.”

Matt slammed the phone down again. “Relax, hell.” He’d been afraid he wouldn’t get the results he wanted, and had prepared for it. With or without his chief’s sanction, he would get his baby away from the danger and protect Molly.

\* \* \* \*

Edgy, and pumped up for the trial, Molly got up at dawn. Her sleeplessness wasn’t all bad. She wanted to spend extra time with Sara Jane. She’d expected the sequestration of witnesses and tight security, but she hadn’t considered that she’d only get to see her baby at night. Ed told her once they took her to the courthouse each day she would stay there until the end of the day’s session to cut down on the risk.

Molly fed Sara Jane cereal and fruit. Afterward they played patty-cake and catch the bubbles, using a round bubble wire and a jar of soap. Sara Jane was getting more personality every day, and she was as cute as a kitten as she pinched the air with dimpled fingers, trying to gather rainbow-filled orbs.

Ed tapped on Molly’s door. “The waiter brought pastries and fruit,” he said. “And I made some coffee. Come join us.”

Molly smiled and joined the agents in the living room, glad for the opportunity to get some answers. “Who’ll be watching my baby?”

“Gina Nogales,” Ed said. “She’s a highly skilled agent.” He patted Molly’s hand and grinned. “And she’s good with babies. Raised two of her own.”

“Only one agent?”

He laughed and gestured to the guys with his fork. “Ramon and Gordon will be with her, too. I’ll escort you to and from the courtroom. Two other agents will assist me. No one will get near either of you.”

“Is Matt one of the agents?”

“No. He’ll be busy. He has to testify, too.”

“Then I’ll see him today?”

“Don’t count on it. You may not be in court at the same time.” Ed sounded pleased at that prospect.

Molly frowned. Matt had sent only that scant five-word note, then nothing. He’d said he loved her. She’d been through this with him before. Why didn’t he fight to be with her? At least get another message to her.

Ed touched her arm. “Buck up, kid. When this is over you can go back to your life, your job . . . if you want it. Or maybe . . .” He was looking at her in that way again, as if he wanted to be part of that future.

She met his gaze. "I can't think that far ahead. I just want to get through this."

Ed glanced at his watch, and then pushed his plate away. "Better get dressed. Showtime in forty-five minutes."

A soft tapping came from the connecting door of the adjoining room. "It's Gina," a female voice called.

Ed unlocked the inner security lock, and Gina came through the doorway smiling. "Hey, what a beautiful baby," she said with warmth in her tone. "I have everything set up next door. And don't worry. This cutie pie and I will get along just fine." Gina picked up the baby.

When she disappeared through the connecting doorway, Molly blinked, fighting the tears that pushed at the backs of her eyes. "Keep my baby safe," she called past the constriction in her throat.

\* \* \* \*

Matt took Luke's call. His brother had been watching Molly and her guards from the hotel across the courtyard through high-powered binoculars. "It's time," he said. "Some woman took Sara Jane to the adjoining room. Just her, no agents."

It was the kind of break the kidnappers would watch for, Matt thought. But he'd get there first. "Get over here now."

"On my way," Luke said.

Matt raced down the hall and knocked on the door adjacent to Molly's suite. "Who is it?"

He recognized the voice. It belonged to Agent Gina Nogales. "Matt Ryan," he said. "I have a court order."

"Stand in front of the peephole," Gina said.

He complied, and she opened the door, gun in hand. "You won't need that. I'm alone."

Gina tucked the gun back into her holster. Sara Jane was in the playpen, babbling happily. God, how she'd grown. He'd missed all those months.

Matt showed Gina his temporary custody order.

She frowned. "No one told me about this. Hold on. Ramon and Gordon will be here in a moment. You can show this to them."

Matt was prepared for resistance. He lunged at Gina with a cloth permeated with chloroform and held it over her nose until she stopped struggling and went limp. "I'm breaking every kind of law here," he whispered, "and I'm deeply sorry, but my baby's life is at stake."

He grabbed Sara Jane and hurried down the corridor to the room at the end where Tita and her son Roberto waited. Tita put a tiny dark wig of short curly hair on the baby and wrapped her in a serape, and then the little family of three rushed to a waiting cab.

Matt swallowed past the lump in his throat. He hadn't had time to hold her, talk to her, tell his Sunshine how much her daddy loved her. But she'd be safe now. He looked at his watch. He only had minutes to make sure Molly was safe, too.

\* \* \* \*

Molly was putting the final touches to her makeup when she heard window glass shatter. Unfamiliar men's voices shouted orders. She ran and peered around the doorframe. Oh, God, no. There were five armed men with stocking masks over their faces. Del Fuego's men!

She had to get back to the adjoining room where her baby was being cared for by the woman agent. Then escape to the corridor. She dropped to the floor behind the couch and crawled to the door of the connecting room. Easing the door open, she crawled through the doorway, softly closed the door, and locked it.

She stood and turned. The playpen was empty! Gina was unconscious. Or dead. Molly raced across the room. She stuck her head into the bathroom. Empty. There were no other rooms. Her baby was gone!

She fell to her knees next to Gina and checked her pulse. She was alive. Molly spied Gina's gun. She grabbed it from the holster and tucked it in the back of the waistband of her skirt beneath her jacket.

Through the door, she heard a man shouting. "Where is she? We want the woman now!"

She had to disappear. But how could she leave without Sara Jane?

A quick series of shots blasted a hole in the door. She froze. A large hand reached through and unlocked the door. Before she had time to draw the gun, a dark-skinned man appeared in the doorway with an assault weapon pointed at her.

He glanced at the body on the floor. "What's going on here?"

Molly couldn't speak. She shook her head.

He looked into the bathroom, then gestured with his weapon and shoved Molly back through the doorway. "Get over by the others."

The FBI agents' weapons were on the floor. Four men trained guns on the agents. Molly didn't understand where her baby was. But she was glad she wasn't here.

“What’s up, Rico?” a masked man asked.

“Not sure. There’s a body in there. Drag it in here.”

The man dragged Gina through the doorway by her feet. “Are you sure we got everyone?” he asked in a nervous voice.

“Si.”

“Now what?” the man asked.

“We shoot them.” Rico’s eyes were wild. He kicked the body. “Her, too.” Then he pointed his gun at Molly’s head. “You first, Señorita. You won’t be testifying today. Or ever.”

A small explosion blew the door to the corridor inward. Matt charged into the room and shot the weapon from Rico’s hand. Luke followed and shouted, “Freeze!”

One of the masked men whirled and pointed a gun at Matt’s head.

Molly had already drawn Gina’s gun in trembling hands and aimed at the heart of the masked man about to shoot Matt. “Don’t even think about it, scumbag!” she said.

The man studied her for a full second, then slowly lowered his weapon and let it thud to the floor. The FBI agents scrambled for their guns and pointed them at the stunned masked men.

“You were great,” Ed told Molly.

“Sensational,” Matt agreed. “Thanks, Molly. I—”

“We owe you one, Matt,” Ed said.

“Tell Gina that. She’s going to be mad as hell at me when she wakes up.”

“You did that to one of your own?” Molly asked. “Then you have my baby?”

“Our baby. And she’s fine. I sent her where no one will find her.” He glanced at his watch, then at Ed. “Better get Molly to court. Can’t keep the judge waiting. Time to convict Del Fuego, and lock him away for good.”

Molly frowned. That was Matt, always in control, commanding, issuing orders.

“I want to know where you’ve taken Sara Jane.”

“Tita and Roberto have taken her to a safe place until after the trial,” he said. “Tell you more later. Now go.”

She wasn't satisfied, but he'd saved their child, and now it was her turn to save other babies by testifying against Del Fuego. Still, hurt welled inside her. She wanted Matt to hold her, kiss her, tell her how much he missed her.

As though he'd read her mind, he said, "There's no time, Molly."

## Chapter Fifteen

Ed grabbed Molly's arm and, stepping over debris from the explosion and leaving Matt behind, hustled her through the doorway to the corridor, heading straight for court.

When the long, tedious day giving testimony was over, Ed and the other guards escorted her to the new hotel. Someone had moved her belongings to the new place. She expected Matt to be there. Hoped he'd be there. He wasn't.

Ramon explained about Santana's call to Matt and how the attack was Del Fuego's last-ditch effort to stop the trial.

"Is Matt in trouble?" she asked.

"Nothing he can't handle, but he had to report to the chief for his . . . unorthodox tactics." Ramon looked at her with an unreadable expression. "Said he'd see you after the trial."

"After the trial?" she shouted. She took a breath and closed her eyes a moment to calm herself. "Where's my baby?"

"He wouldn't say. Just that your baby stays hidden until the trial's over."

"Get my baby back, or I won't testify."

"Do you really want to set the guy free who steals babies? Sells them to the highest bidder?"

She glared at Ramon. He had her number, all right. He knew she couldn't back out now, not when she was so close to putting Del Fuego away.

The trial went on for two months. Every day, she longed for Sara Jane and wavered between being grateful to Matt for saving her and hating him for keeping her baby from her. When the verdict was read, she sighed in relief. Del Fuego was going away forever for killing a federal agent, and his men would be so old when they got out that she wasn't worried about them kidnapping other babies—or coming after her. She was free at last.

As she left the courthouse, news reporters stuck microphones in her face. "How do you feel?" a reporter asked.

"Numb, relieved," she said.

Ed appeared from behind, flashed his badge, and grabbed her arm. "No more statements," he told the reporters and waved them away. "May I give you a lift?"

"No. Thanks. I want to be alone for a while. I haven't been by myself in a very long time, and I need time to think."

"May I call you?"

Molly touched his arm. “Not the way you mean. This is good-bye, Ed.” Her voice wavered. “And thanks. You were a good friend through all this, and I won’t forget you.” She turned and hurried down the courthouse steps, afraid she might cry.

A shiny red truck was parked at the curb, and Matt leaned against it. “Ready to go home, little darlin’?”

Her throat tightened. She stared at him, wondering how he dared to show up here after no word—and looking so damned good.

She cleared her throat. “You kept my baby from me. I’ve been going crazy without her. You have no idea what it’s been like not having her with me.”

“Don’t I?” He met her gaze. “For months, I didn’t know where either of you were. Or if you were all right.”

“So you paid me back?”

“I kept her safe.”

“Where is she?” Molly fought the tears pushing at the backs of her eyes.

“At the ranch with Tita and my family.”

“And before that?”

“Tita’s sister, Maria, lives in a convent in San Antonio. Tita took her there.”

“Once Del Fuego’s men were in custody, you should have brought her to me. You had no right to keep her away.” Molly hated the tremor in her voice.

“Didn’t I?”

She could only look at him, afraid of what he might mean. Was he taking her home, or allowing visiting privileges? A cold lump formed in her stomach. Matt was the father. Would he try to take Sara Jane from her?

He opened the door and motioned for her to get in. She hesitated. “Why did you do things this way and put me through hell?”

“For Sara Jane. I wasn’t about to take any more chances with her life.”

Molly had no choice but to get into the truck with him. To get Sara Jane back, she would play his little game, even if it meant going through the pain of losing him again.

He gunned the truck to life. It began to rain, and he flicked on the windshield wipers. The dust on the windows disappeared with the first strokes. The rhythm of the wide sweeps hypnotized her. Her spirit felt as gray and cloudy as the sky. The rain was short-lived, but it



could start again at any moment. Leaving town, they seemed to be driving into a storm. He drove a short distance, then stopped at the first rest stop. "I think we'd better talk."

She nodded numbly.

The air smelled musty. They walked beneath dripping oaks, dodging raindrops. He grabbed her arm and turned her to face him. "What is it? You don't want to go back to the ranch?"

"I want my baby."

"That's the only reason you're going with me?"

A raindrop fell from an oak branch and caught on her eyelash. She blinked it away. "Why else? You don't want me. You dumped me on other agents. Just like last time."

"It wasn't like last time. I was in the hospital, unconscious when they took you from me. Didn't anyone tell you?"

"Ed told me. But that doesn't account for your showing up like gangbusters, then disappearing again with my baby." She steadied her voice. "I haven't heard from you since the trial started. Two months of facing court and Del Fuego alone."

Her heart had believed that Matt loved her, but her mind remembered he'd left her before.

"My boss ordered me to stay away from you until after the trial. If I didn't, he would send me to jail for my unlawful rescue. He was afraid that if we got involved during the proceedings, it would jeopardize the outcome."

Molly swallowed. "Are you going to try to take Sara Jane from me?"

He looked at her as if she had two heads. "Are you crazy? I'd never do that. I want us to raise her together. Be a real family."

*A real family.* Dare she believe it could work? "So you controlled things without a thought to what I might want."

"What is it you want?" Confusion shadowed his expression. "I thought you wanted our daughter to be safe."

"Of course I wanted that. But—" The lump in her throat swelled. Dare she just come out with it? Put her heart on the line again? She laughed without humor. "I want it to be like it's supposed to be. You and me and baby makes three—our lives entwined forever. But you left before. Then you left me again with nothing but a damned five-word note. I'm afraid you'll hurt me again."

"Molly, everything I did was to protect you and Sara Jane. Nothing else mattered. I know I'm controlling and I've hurt you. But—" He swallowed. "Do you believe I love you?"

“I want to believe it.”

“I could make all kinds of excuses, but the truth is I was just plain scared. Scared of losing you, of losing our baby.” He drew Molly into his arms and kissed her, his fingers burrowing deep into her hair. “You make me want to be less controlling,” he murmured against her lips. “Take the reins with me. Please, Molly.”

The sun peeked out from behind a dark cloud. Although it only stayed out for a moment, Molly took that as an omen that she should grab the sunshine of his love before it slipped away. “Okay, move over, cowboy. From now on we’re in this together all the way, but—”

His lips covered hers, cutting off words and breath. She didn’t care. She had a lifetime to tell him everything in her heart.

\* \* \* \*

A week later, Matt and Molly rode Gold King and Starlight out to Verde Creek where the minister and several dozen friends, ranch hands, and family waited. She smiled at Matt riding so close, purposely making her acutely aware of the masterful rhythm of his body riding easily in the saddle, acutely aware of her own desire.

Matt wore a black western tuxedo with a string tie and a brand-new black Stetson. Riding a horse in a cowboy tux was no problem for Matt, but trying to ride in a traditional bridal gown—that was a challenge for Molly.

As they rode into the shade of a cluster of oak trees, Molly heard the sweet strains of a mockingbird and saw the tree-shaded, silvery green waters of Verde Creek spilling over boulders in frothy mini-waterfalls. It was just like the first time they came here. But better. This was her wedding day.

Matt frowned. “Guess I’ll have to stop calling you Molly now, won’t I? Your name is Katrina.”

“I rather like the sound of Molly Ryan,” she said. “You can call me anything you like, cowboy, as long as you never forget that I’m your little darlin’.”

He winked. “Never.”

Matt reined his horse to a stop. The brim of the Stetson shading his eyes couldn’t hide his very intense expression. He looked every molecule the handsome groom. He swung from his saddle, and his thigh muscles tightened under his tuxedo trousers. Molly didn’t bother to steel herself against the familiar hot tremor that shot through her when he grasped her waist through a thin layer of delicate lace and swung her to the ground. How lucky she was to have a body that was so sensitive to her future husband’s touch.

The restful sound of Verde Creek soothed her inner turmoil and steadied her racing heart. Matt moved aside the veil that framed her face and looked into her eyes. She entwined her arms around his neck and drew him closer. Memories flooded over her, beautiful memories

of the times they'd made love. Of all the kisses, she remembered best the kiss they had shared here. At the time she'd thought she was already married; now that was about to become a reality. A thrill charged through her, and she examined the face of the man she loved. Matt's face was a sculpture of strong angles and planes, and she loved every square centimeter of it.

He let out a groan of pleasure, bent, and captured her lips in a taking that was completely familiar—completely welcome—completely wonderful.

When they ended the kiss, the wife of one of the vaqueros handed Molly a huge bouquet of bluebonnets and baby's breath. "You look muy bonita," she said, smiling.

Tita, holding a smiling Sara Jane, sat nearby with Alfonso, Roberto, and Suzy on folding chairs on a stage that had been erected under a big old oak, Roberto strumming a guitar and Suzy looking at Roberto like a lovesick pup. Luke and Connie Lou sat at the edge of the makeshift stage, her holding their baby and Luke holding her.

Matt's parents and Molly's mom and sister were driving out together. They were a little late, but in the distance, Molly saw a cloud of dust and knew it came from the tires of Matt's parents' Cadillac.

Molly stared at her Stetson-wearing bridegroom pacing next to the creek. "I can't believe you're so nervous over a little ol' wedding ceremony."

He lifted a dark devilish brow. "And I suppose you're not?"

She flung herself into his arms and whispered against his lips. "Not at all. How could I be when everything is so right?"

The End

## *About the Author*

Lynde Lakes holds a master's degree from the University of California and is the author of eighteen novels, including: *Cowboy Lies* (part of a trilogy), *Billboard Cop*, and several novellas, including *Midnight Destiny*, with Amira Press. Her novels are mostly romantic intrigues with several paranormal and fantasy intrigues. Writing Matt and Molly's story brought back fond memories of the summer Lynde spent on a Texas cattle ranch in her teens. She is presently working on a romantic intrigue that promises to be an intense thriller. Her passions are her family and writing. She is an avid dancer, skater, and walker. And she wishes you lucky horseshoes in your life.