

CLAIRE  
KING

RENEGADE  
WITH A BADGE



INTRIGUE ...

Claire King

**Renegade With A Badge**

«HarperCollins»

## **King C.**

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Deep in the wilderness of Baja California, undercover agent Rafe Camayo was closing in on the ruthless drug trafficker who had destroyed his family. Nothing stood between him and the revenge he had sought for so long. Nothing except his unwelcome passion for the beautiful gringa he had taken "hostage" to protect his cover - and her life.... Olivia Galpas knew she should fear the dark, dangerous bandido who had torn her away from everything she knew and loved. And yet something within her cried out to her to surrender, body and soul, to this man who held her captive - a man from whom she somehow knew she could never escape....

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**Rafe leaned forward, ruthlessly ignoring the scent of her, the nearness of her, and his physical reaction to both. “You think I am a madman?”**

“Of—of course I do,” Olivia whispered.

The catch in her voice, the little hesitation that revealed her fear, undid him. How dare she fear him, when he was the good guy? It didn’t occur to him how ludicrous it was to be so indignant that his cover was working well enough to fool even this brilliant, beautiful scientist.

He advanced on her, deliberately brushing his lean body against hers. She retreated, step for step, until she was backed against the door. He pressed mercilessly into her and reveled in the trembling of her body. He was undeniably aroused.

“Maybe I am a madman,” he muttered darkly, just as he caught her mouth with his.

Dear Reader,

This is officially “Get Caught Reading” month, so why not get caught reading one—or all!—of this month’s Intimate Moments books? We’ve got six you won’t be able to resist.

In Whitelaw’s Wedding, Beverly Barton continues her popular miniseries THE PROTECTORS. Where does the Dundee Security Agency come up with such great guys—and where can I find one in real life? A YEAR OF LOVING DANGEROUSLY is almost over, but not before you read about Cinderella’s Secret Agent, from Ingrid Weaver. Then come back next month, when Sharon Sala wraps things up in her signature compelling style.

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And, of course, come back next month as the excitement continues in Intimate Moments, home of your favorite authors and the best in romantic reading.



Leslie J. Wainger  
Executive Senior Editor

**Renegade with a Badge**

## CLAIRE KING

lives with her husband, her son, a dozen goats and too many cows on her family's cattle ranch in Idaho. An award-winning agricultural columnist and seasoned cow-puncher, she lives for the spare minutes she can dedicate to reading and writing about people who fall helplessly in love, because, she says, "The romantic lives of my cattle just aren't as interesting as people might think."

To Terrell,  
computing for me in my darkest hour.

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## Prologue

The little boy wore his hand-me-down shoes only on the days his mother made him go to school. Those, too, were the only days he spoke English, and then only to please his teachers. His family, his friends, everyone he'd ever known, in fact, spoke the quick, energetic Spanish of the barrio.

He was barefoot, then, when the police came, and had to run to the room he shared with his brothers for his shoes. When he saw the two officers—dressed as his older brother dressed when he came to the barrio on Friday nights to visit the family and see his compadres—he knew he needed his shoes. It was a special occasion.

His mother began to scream before he had time to tie the frayed laces, and the boy raced down the hall to her, his shoes flapping on his bare feet. She clutched at him, at the other brothers and sisters who'd also run to her at the sound of her wailing.

“He’s dead,” she shrieked in Spanish. “Our Jorge, my first-born son, my baby, is dead.”

Rafael wrenched himself from her snatching fingers and stood staring at the policia who were standing near the door, looking solemn and nervous and sad.

“My brother?” he asked in English, though both men were Hispanic. English was the language of the uniform, if not of the men. “My brother George is dead?”

The men glanced at each other, looked down at Rafael.

“Sí, little brother. He was killed in the line of duty.”

Rafael swallowed unmanly tears. “Was he brave?”

“He was very brave, little brother.”

“Do you know who killed him?”

“Sí. We know.”

“Then you must make him pay.”

“We will make him pay, little brother. We will bring him back to the United States and take him to a judge.”

Rafael nodded. George had told him many times how important it was to bring the bad men before the judge. It was the only honorable way to keep the peace in America. He peered up at the men, who stood very tall, very somber and straight, while his mother sobbed her grief behind him.

“If you do not,” he said, making the first of many vows, “I will bring him to America and make him face the judge myself.”

## Chapter 1

Olivia Galpas hated parties.

She frowned into the dimly lit motel bathroom mirror and tucked a disobedient strand of dark hair back into the tidy, wide braid at her back. Her thick hair was objecting to the first freshwater washing it had had in three weeks. It was better accustomed to saltwater and dish soap.

The frown lines between her flashing eyes deepened further. Stupid parties. Stupid hair. She considered hacking off the offending piece with the scissors in her Swiss Army knife, but decided that would be shortsighted, and worked it more carefully into the braid. Where it stayed. For ten seconds. She finally routed a hairpin from her backpack and shoved it in, capturing the wayward strand.

It wasn't that she was unsociable, she thought, turning her attention to inspecting her teeth for remains of the tacos she'd just finished. She sucked a bit of cilantro from between her perfect front incisors and reached for her toothbrush.

No, she wasn't unsociable at all. She loved people, considered herself adept with them, despite a certain natural reserve she'd inherited from her proud Latino father. She'd just finished a three-week assignment in this little village in Baja California—or, more accurately, on the village's nearby beach—cheek by jowl most days with her team of three fellow oceanographers and one marine biologist on loan from Sea World who were studying the effects of current on winter whale migration. And she hadn't suffered at all from it. And marine biologists were notoriously difficult to get along with. Obsessive, whale-loving creatures.

But parties.

She spit toothpaste into the sink and rinsed her mouth. “Eeh,” she said to the mirror.

Olivia studied the paltry array of cosmetics on the bathroom counter, delaying the inevitable. She'd happily come to Baja three weeks ago without so much as a lipstick. Who knew she'd become the object of the town bigwig's affection and be required to tart herself up for a going-away party?

But she had, inexplicably—and so had had to go shopping this afternoon, another chore of which she was insufficiently fond. And not just shopping for the makeup, but for the pretty Mexican peasant skirt and blouse she wore, and the impractical, adorable sandals that even now were beginning to make her feet ache.

Olivia sighed. Three weeks in a bathing suit, a pair of quick-dry shorts and rubber sandals spoiled a girl.

“Eeh,” she said again, this time sticking out her tongue.

She'd been trotted out to a hundred parties since she'd joined the senior staff at Scripps Institute of Oceanography in San Diego two years earlier. As one of the few female oceanographers at the university—and the youngest—she'd endured more Cajun shrimp and mini-quiches and cocktail chatter than one person should have to in a lifetime. But this party was different.

The host was Ernesto Cervantes.

Very interesting person, this handsome Mexican man. Rich beyond what seemed reasonable in the small Baja village, smartly dressed in a sharply pressed khaki uniform that marked him as the chief of the local law enforcement agency; courtly, attentive, well-spoken.

And decidedly captivated by Olivia Galpas.

The chief, everyone in Aldea Viejo called him. Hefe. The sheriff and the wealthiest man between the border and La Paz. Ernesto wore the title with all the importance it implied, used his family's money to do good in his poor community, and had enough free time left over to spend almost every day for three weeks at the beach camp set up by the institute, courting the lovely Dr. Galpas.

She was flattered—but Olivia, practical to a fault, suspected Ernesto would have fallen madly in love with any woman who'd met his criteria. He seemed rather more enamored with the courtship than he actually was with her.

He'd been at camp the first day she'd arrived, along with a phalanx of similarly uniformed men, to welcome them. As team leader, Olivia had accepted the formal welcome with all the equanimity of a woman well-accustomed to the stately and ceremonious rituals of the Mexican aristocracy.

He'd come to camp the next day, too. And the next. Each time on some pretext of duty. But the pretext fell away soon enough, and he began taking Olivia, alone, on walks along the beach. Well, not quite alone, Olivia recalled. Every step had been monitored, oddly enough, by at least one or two of his deputies. Nevertheless, Olivia got the gist.

Ernesto Cervantes was fast approaching fifty and had not yet found a wife. Olivia, with her education and genteel manners and impeccable Mexican heritage—Ernesto would kindly overlook that her family had been in San Diego for a hundred years—fit the bill exactly, it seemed.

Olivia had to admit she was more than a little interested in his oblique suggestions of a future together. She may have been preoccupied with her job, but she wasn't immune to perfect breeding and a handsome face. And given time and Ernesto's proper introduction to her family and an assurance that she could continue her work, she'd probably agree to marry. That little biological clock she'd been ignoring wouldn't tick forever.

But Olivia was a woman of science by education and of prudence by nature, and three weeks' worth of walks on the beach were not enough to convince her of anything.

So tonight, wearing makeup and a decent outfit and with her hair forced into place, dammit, she'd attend the going-away party Ernesto had planned and eat shrimp and make cocktail-party conversation. Tomorrow, she'd follow her colleagues back home.

And after that? Well, prudently, she'd just wait and see what happened.

She left the motel and walked through the quaint, quiet streets of Aldea Viejo. She knew where the hacienda was, of course. One could catch a glimpse of it from almost any vantage point in town.

The house was all that Ernesto had said it was, Olivia thought as she walked through the open iron front gates several minutes later and strolled across the manicured front lawn, which looked bizarrely green in its desert surroundings. It was grand, ancient and graceful, as every old Mexican mansion should be. Olivia was terribly impressed.

She smoothed her hair, grateful the wind hadn't whipped it from its pins on the short walk up the hill from the village, and pressed her lips together to make certain she'd remembered to put on that hastily purchased lipstick.

She was glad she'd bought the long skirt and matching blouse. It was made of inexpensive cotton, but it was of a traditional style that suited the house, and it was certainly better than her other "best" outfit—chinos and a camp shirt.

Olivia took a last, deep breath before she entered the wide-open doors of the front entrance to the hacienda. The double doors were made of solid oak, she noticed, and reinforced with beautiful flat iron scrollwork.

If she was going to have to attend a stupid party, this was certainly a nice place to do it. She doubted she'd find a single mini-quiche in this gorgeous house.

"Olivia," Ernesto said, as she entered the foyer. He disengaged himself from a small, attentive group of people to come to her. Candles glowed everywhere, giving off the scent of Mexican jasmine and the aura of old-world elegance. Ernesto was dressed impeccably and he, too, smelled slightly of jasmine. Olivia had to struggle not to fuss with her dress.

"Ernesto," Olivia said, and let him kiss her on the mouth. He had to bend slightly to do so; his elegant, lean frame towered by several inches over her smaller one. "Your home is more beautiful than you described it."

He smiled graciously. "It seems, Olivia, that my father built it just so that beautiful women would be impressed by it." His deep brown eyes glowed with sincerity and the reflection of a hundred candles. Olivia flushed at the compliment.

"I'm sure they are, then," she said.

“Your team?” He made a show of looking around. “They have not come with you?”

The invitation had been for all of Olivia’s team, but their work had been finished the day before, and as none of them were being courted by the local hefe they’d decided to pack up camp and leave this morning.

“No, and you should be grateful. They’d have eaten you out of house and home,” Olivia said.

Ernesto smiled indulgently. “That, as you can see, would be difficult to do.” He led her into the main salon, where people appeared to be waiting for her arrival. “I have some people here I would like to introduce you to.”

Every eye turned to her as Ernesto introduced her to the room at large. He made careful mention of her position at Scripps in the introduction, Olivia observed.

“I’m only an assistant department head, Ernesto,” she whispered to him after the introduction was complete and she had been greeted like a queen. “There are four of those in my department alone. You made it sound as though I was running the whole place.”

He handed her a flute of champagne. “I am proud of you,” he said gently. “That is not such a bad thing, is it?”

“No,” Olivia admitted, taking a sip of champagne. “Oh! Dom Pérignon.”

Ernesto laughed. “I knew you were a woman of breeding, Olivia. But a wine connoisseur, as well? You will be a blessing at my table.” He kissed the hand he’d been holding. “Most of my friends, though I love them like family, don’t know a Dom Pérignon from a cheap Chablis.”

“Oh,” she said into her glass. “Well, thank you for inviting me.”

“No, Olivia,” Ernesto said, gazing meaningfully into her eyes. “Thank you for being here. It means so much to me.”

Olivia smiled and took another quick sip of champagne.

She had no idea what the intent, mysterious gleam in his eye was all about, but she would have bet that it didn’t have anything to do with identifying wine.

“I’d like you to meet some of my friends,” Ernesto said, taking her arm.

“Some of your friends?” Olivia said, looking around the crowded room.

Ernesto laughed again, and Olivia couldn’t help but smile. Oh, the man was in his element.

Olivia allowed him to guide her through the crowd. They made it just one or two steps forward at a time, as everyone wanted some attention from the hefe. Ernesto skillfully worked the crowd, while Olivia smiled and spoke easily with his guests, slipping automatically into Spanish, the language of her childhood home. But she had the oddest itch at the back of her neck, and it wasn’t until nearly an hour after she arrived that she figured out why. Everywhere she looked, there were uniformed men standing guard. Armed with unsmiling, intimidating faces and big, scary guns.

“Uh, Ernesto?”

Ernesto turned at once at the small tug on his sleeve. He covered Olivia’s rough, sea-weathered hand with his own smooth, manicured one and smiled deferentially down at her. Oh, yes, Olivia thought, distracted for a moment. This man could run Mexico from this hacienda. He had all the charm and old-world refinement of a Don.

“Yes, Olivia?”

She blinked up at him. “Pardon?”

Ernesto brought her hand to his lips. Olivia wanted to snatch it back; it looked like a sea hag’s gnarled fist against his full, beautiful mouth.

“You are tired of all this inane conversation, my dear?”

“What? No, of course not,” she protested, though, in truth, she would have given her right arm for a cold Mexican beer, her laptop and her narrow cot in her beach camp tent right about now. “I was just wondering about all the men here.”

Ernesto lifted one graceful brow. “The men here?” he said.

Olivia felt a little chill slide right past the itch at the back of her neck, but decided she must have imagined the slight menace in Ernesto's perfectly modulated tone.

"I mean the men you have in uniform. Your deputies. Why are they here, at a party?"

"Ah, that. To protect my guests, of course," he said, relaxing visibly. He swept his arm in an unmistakably urbane gesture. He smiled again, that charming flash of teeth. "They are unobtrusive, though, are they not? I believe it's your American sensibilities that made you notice them at all."

"Why do your guests need protection?"

Ernesto sighed, then turned away for a moment to greet yet another supplicant. Olivia did a quick count of Ernesto's not-so-unobtrusive pack of gun-toters. Fifteen!

"I'm sorry, Olivia," Ernesto said when he returned his attention to her. "You were saying?"

"Why do you have so many men posted here at the hacienda? Have you had trouble? Are you expecting trouble?"

Ernesto's lips compressed ever so briefly, then he took Olivia's arm again and led her to a relatively quiet corner. "Olivia," he began patiently. "I am the sheriff of Aldea Viejo, as well as a very wealthy man."

"Yes, I know, Ernesto."

"And as such, I face many dangers, every day. We have criminals here in this small village, just as you have in your large American cities."

"But at a party?"

Ernesto shrugged, his broad shoulders enhanced by the fine cut of his suit.

"Have you been robbed here at the hacienda?"

Ernesto's eyes darkened. "Certainly not."

"Are your guests in the habit of walking off with the family silver?"

"Olivia," Ernesto admonished, offended.

Olivia smiled, but rubbed at the back of her neck all the same. "I'm teasing, Ernesto."

He watched her carefully for a moment, then leaned to kiss her lightly on her mouth. "I should hope so. Do not concern yourself with these questions, Olivia. I have my men here to protect my guests." He smiled gently. "Most especially my guest of honor. It is my duty to protect you, Olivia. And it is my pleasure."

"I don't need protection, Ernesto," Olivia said meaningfully. Best to begin as you mean to go on, she thought. "I have been taking excellent care of myself for several years now."

Ernesto wrapped her hand around his forearm, scanning the crowd of guests absently. "Another thing I admire about you, Olivia." He brought her hand to his mouth again and kissed it. "But in all your travels, I cannot imagine you have come across the kind of men I am dealing with now."

"The smugglers?" He'd mentioned it before, on one of their walks. Drug shipments had been coming through Aldea Viejo, out of range of the Mexican Federal Police, the federales, in La Paz. Ernesto was determined to bring the smugglers to justice, but they'd been as slippery as reef eels so far.

"They are very dangerous, these men," Ernesto said.

"But not stupid. I doubt very much they'd crash this party."

Ernesto's eyes narrowed fractionally. "One never knows what the criminal mind will think of doing." Ernesto smiled, nabbed another glass of champagne from a passing tray and toasted Olivia cordially before taking a sip. "Does one?"

Rafael Camayo crept through the house, using the clamor of the party on the floor below to cover what little noise he made. Though his mother would be shocked to know it, this was hardly the first time he'd broken into someone's home and searched through every room like a bandit.

It was, however, the first time it had ever been so important to him.

Rafe skirted a lighted doorway. A fussy little powder room, he noted with disdain, wondering how many of the ladies and gentlemen using the elaborate, gold-plated facilities knew how Cervantes had paid for them.

He smiled grimly. Probably more than a few. Rafe knew from years of tracking Cervantes that many of the man's friends were actually more like associates; partners in crime, so to speak. Not that Rafe's employers—the United States Drug Enforcement Agency—or their associates in the Mexican government had ever been able to get the goods on any of them. Lesser men fell, swept up in routine drug raids, while Cervantes and his swanky pals held lavish dinner parties and toasted each other's cleverness.

He and his partner, Bobby, had been in Baja California for months now, trying to change all that. They'd been methodically stealing drug shipments from Cervantes's men and slipping them surreptitiously into the hands of DEA agents across the border in Mexico. They made no arrests, busted neither the men at the drop site nor the runners who brought the stuff over from mainland Mexico. They simply swept in—or snuck in, depending upon the situation and the likelihood one of them would be shot through the head—and stole what Ernesto Cervantes firmly believed was his.

It was a last-ditch effort, a plan devised by Rafe and Bobby alone, and one that neither the federales nor Rafe's superior officers at the DEA thought likely to succeed. But Rafe and Bobby were determined.

They knew Cervantes—knew him inside and out—though neither of them had ever been within fifty feet of the man. They knew he could outwait the authorities and their traditional methods forever, keeping his minions on the front line while he led his respectable, lawful life.

But he would never tolerate being ripped off by a couple of filthy, low-class bandidos.

It was driving the big man crazy, Rafe thought with an unprofessional smirk, just as they'd hoped it would. Cervantes was a canny kingpin, but a kingpin nonetheless, and with the ego to go along with the title. It wouldn't be long—couldn't be long, according to Rafe's superiors back in San Diego—before he showed up at one of the shipment sites himself. Rafe could almost smell Cervantes's frustration, could almost touch it.

It was certainly evident by all the thugs he had posted at this little soiree.

Rafe had easily slipped past them all, of course. Another thing that would have shocked his mother. Ten years as an undercover DEA agent was excellent training, but it was nothing to the years in the San Diego barrio of his youth. A boy who spoke no English learned how to fade into any background in the border towns of San Diego, or he risked being picked up by cruising immigration officers looking for his illegally “immigrated” parents.

Rafe searched the next room he came to, wincing slightly as the heavy carved door creaked atmospherically on its iron hinges. The four men the Mexican federales had inside Cervantes's organization had already been through every scrap of paper in Cervantes's office, but had yet to find anything incriminating. The party tonight had given Rafe the first opportunity since he'd come to Baja to get inside the rest of the house and do a little snooping of his own.

Nothing in this room; not that he'd expected much. Cervantes was unlikely to keep records of his illegal activities in an upstairs guest room. Still, procedure dictated a thorough search. He closed the door behind him and stood absolutely still in the gloomy hallway, listening, waiting.

Rafe cocked his head at a small sound, separate from the cacophony coming from downstairs. Well, hell. Someone was coming up the second stairway.

He looked quickly around and decided the best he could do on such short notice was try to melt into the wide, darkened doorway behind him. If he tried to get back into the room he'd just left, the damn door would give him away. He cursed old houses and all their charm. Give him a nice, quiet apartment with brand-new vinyl doors any day.

He stood perfectly still and let the person walk past him. A woman. Before he could make out her face or shape, he could hear the seductive swish of a skirt, smell the faint scent of perfume. She had a beautiful scent, this woman. She smelled like the sea.

Lord, it had been a long time since he'd been so close to a woman.

Against his better judgment, Rafe lifted his eyes. He knew that people seemed to sense when they were being watched, and the last thing he needed right now was for one of Cervantes's snotty dinner guests to start screaming about bandits in the upstairs hallways.

But he couldn't resist. He was partially aroused from the scent of her alone. Oh, yeah, he thought ruefully, shifting his weight slightly. Way too many months on the job.

The woman passed by him on her way to the bathroom.

Rafe nearly snarled out loud as he recognized her.

The princess. Cervantes's princess. The woman, he knew from his informants on the inside, that Cervantes planned to marry. Dr. Olivia Galpas. He'd made it a point to find out her name the day Cervantes first visited her on the beach. He'd had her investigated, of course. Anyone Cervantes spent that much time with, American or not, female or male, had to be checked out.

She'd been clean, as far as the DEA was concerned, but that didn't make her any more likable in Rafe's mind.

She was a princesa, from one of the oldest and finest Latino families in San Diego. Her mother was some famous artist, her father was a physician. She was a doctor herself, born with a silver spoon in her mouth, and handed every opportunity. While he'd been picking avocados to get through junior college, the princesa had been whiling away her time at Stanford and then MIT.

Apparently, all the expensive education hadn't made her any smarter, Rafe thought sourly as he watched her flick on the light in the small room and close the door behind her. She was keeping very dangerous company, and seemed to be enjoying herself doing it. Rafe's eyes narrowed in the darkness. Money and power were vigorous aphrodisiacs to a woman who was accustomed to having both in her life.

Like was always attracted to like.

Olivia Galpas was here in Cervantes's house, upstairs even, where guests did not usually go. So, there was more to this relationship than he'd thought, was there? He'd have to keep that in mind. Maybe the pretty little doctor knew exactly what kind of dirty drug money paid for the gold-plated fixtures in the bathroom she was using.

Rafe shook his head slightly. Settle down, there, Rafael. A rather intense reaction to one glimpse of a woman in a hallway, he had to admit. And jumping to conclusions was not his style, either. He was a very deliberate sort of cop.

But Olivia Galpas was everything in a woman Rafael Camayo naturally resented, everything he instinctively despised. He liked women with heart, with passion, with guts. He didn't like pampered, overeducated, rich girls who slept with any drug runner with a woman's soft hands and a big house. Especially one they'd known just three weeks.

Only, God, she smelled good. It was indefinable, that scent of the beach and woman she left in her wake. He'd never smelled anything like it. Not perfume, but... essence. If he could have dragged enough of it into his lungs, he thought, he could live on it alone for a week. No food, no water—just that smell.

He knew he needed to move on through the house, use every opportunity the party was giving him to find what he could and then get the hell out. But something about the woman behind that powder room door—aside from her scent, he told himself firmly—kept him rooted to the spot. Maybe she'd come back out and he'd give her a little talking-to, American to American. Let her in on the secrets behind Ernesto Cervantes's "family" wealth. Haul her gorgeous little rear end right out of this house and get her on the next plane Stateside. As any good American law enforcement agent would do.

Only, he couldn't. And wouldn't.

Ernesto Cervantes had killed his brother almost twenty years ago. He and Bobby—who in addition to being his partner was his carnal, his blood brother from childhood, his cousin, and the godson of Rafe's dead brother—had spent those twenty years plotting, planning the kind of revenge that would have made George proud. They'd joined the local police force, then the DEA; had worked their way up the ladder in all the ways that mattered—for this one bust. He wasn't about to give up those years, those plans, for one amazing-smelling woman, American or not.

Besides, he mused, she may not even want to be saved. His informants had told him how cozy the couple had become. How long the walks, how intense the talks, how delicate and intimate and revolting the whole relationship had become. Maybe Olivia Galpas was in exactly the hot spot she wanted to be in. Maybe she knew everything.

Olivia stepped out into the darkened hallway, flicking off the light behind her. She'd used the facilities, washed her hands, put lotion on, checked her hair, washed her hands again, straightened all the lovely linen guest towels then sat on the edge of the vanity for five minutes, considering the merits of a hot wax treatment to smooth out her sea-coarsened hands. No woman should have rougher hands than her boyfriend, she thought.

But there was no getting around the fact that she had to go back downstairs. Eventually. Even now, Ernesto was probably wondering if she'd eaten some bad shrimp.

She smiled slightly to herself, rolled her eyes. She couldn't imagine Ernesto Cervantes ever wondering about her digestive health. He was so polished and dignified, she didn't think he'd be able to bring himself to admit women had digestive systems, much less to talk about them.

She started down the hall, grateful that for the first time since she'd entered the house she wasn't being stared at by some glowering, khaki-covered baboon. This hallway was obviously in a private portion of the house, where guests were not expected to wander. Well, she'd wandered, and she could hardly see the harm in it. She personally thought Ernesto was carrying the whole protection thing to the limits of high drama. What kind of criminal would break into a man's house while two hundred people were drinking and dancing downstairs?

She stopped before she reached the stairs. That itch on the back of her neck was really driving her crazy. If she didn't know herself any better, she'd think she was having some sort of woman's intuition. But that was ridiculous. She didn't have woman's intuition. She was a scientist.

She turned very slowly and looked right into the face of the man watching her.

Olivia felt as though every ounce of blood drained from her head and leaked out her toes. She had never been so unnerved in all her life. The itch at the back of her neck slithered around her throat and clutched at her jugular. Adrenaline pumped through her like a drug. She didn't know this man, didn't know why he watched her with such intensity, such malice, but she knew she should be afraid of him. And by God, she was.

They stared at each other for what seemed to Olivia like hours, though, of course, it couldn't have been more than a few seconds. He was partially shadowed, but Olivia glimpsed a rough, unshaved Latino face, all planes and angles, with cheekbones that looked sharp enough to cut glass. He had a starved look to him, as though he'd never quite had enough to eat. She sucked in a reflexive breath, unaware she'd stopped breathing.

Rafe's heart thundered in his chest at the sound of that deep breath. He was ready to bolt if she screamed. He'd be no good to this operation—or to George's memory—with a bullet through his heart.

But she didn't scream. She just watched him, calm except for the breathlessness. He respected that even as it occurred to him that perhaps she didn't scream because she was a princesa and thought herself impervious to strange men in dark hallways. He ought to disabuse her of that notion, Rafe thought. He worked up a sneer but could manage nothing more menacing than that. Olivia Galpas was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. And frankly, he'd never had much stomach for threatening women, pretty or not.



She was small, no more than five foot four. Rafe was taller than most of the men in his family by several inches, and this woman's head would hit below his chin. Her hair was plaited down her straight spine in a heavy braid that reached the curve of her bottom. He wondered about the texture of all that braided hair, wondered what it would feel like if he ran his thumb down the length of it.

Her breasts were discreetly camouflaged by the peasant blouse she wore, but they looked small enough for each to fit whole into his mouth. Rafe swallowed hard at that ridiculous idea. This was Cervantes's woman. He no more wanted to touch her than he wanted to put his hand in a basket of rattlesnakes.

Her face was flushed from fear or the sun—he could see the color high on her classic cheekbones even in the dim light of the hallway. She had a small, full mouth that she'd set into a brave and stubborn line he had to admire.

And her eyes. Her eyes.

They were dark, those eyes, with whites like snow and thick lashes Rafe thought she probably used to hide the truth. Her pupils dilated, until he imagined every spark of light in the hallway had been swallowed up by them.

Her eyes flashed at him, and Rafe found his knees weak. An absurd reaction for a man such as Rafael Camayo, he thought. But what could he do? Like a green boy, he was weak-kneed after one look from Ernesto Cervantes's American lover.

Olivia was experiencing the very same sensation in her knees, but for an entirely different reason.

"Who are you?" she said. She'd meant to sound authoritative, barking out a question to be answered at once. But her voice sounded much more like a mewl than a bark, and she could have kicked herself for it. Of course, the man didn't answer such a pathetic little question. Olivia cleared her throat and tried again. "Señor Cervantes has men all over this house, whoever you are," she said, sounding stronger. "If you're not a guest here, I suggest you leave."

Oh, did she? Rafe almost smiled. "I don't take orders from you, princesa," he said, speaking in Spanish, as she had.

"Who are you?" she snapped. Though, of course, she already knew. The drug smuggler, or at least one of them. A man this frightening could only be a pirate, a smuggler, a thief.

She took a step forward, in exactly the opposite direction her prudent, cautious brain was telling her to go. Typical. First her hair and now her feet. Her body was being very disobedient tonight, and if she got out of this little confrontation alive, she intended to have a stern chat with all her various parts.

"Answer me," she said.

Answer me? Rafe's mouth moved back into a sneer. Good grief. Every word out of her mouth was a command. She certainly spoke like a princesa.

The man clearly was not going to answer, even though she'd finally worked up a decent bark. Olivia pulled her lips through her teeth, swallowed the lump of fear in her throat, clamped down on the trembling that was beginning to make her hands shake and her mouth quiver. Demanding answers wasn't going to work, and she clearly was incapable of doing anything as judicious as hiking up her skirt and fleeing down the stairs, screaming bloody murder. Still, this man was invading Ernesto's beautiful home. What kind of friend would she be if she did nothing about that?

"If you don't leave right now," she said calmly, firmly, "I will alert the guards."

Rafe smiled, a flash of white teeth in the shadows. "You won't alert the guards," he said.

Olivia blinked, unnerved by that fierce, confident smile. Weren't smugglers supposed to be furtive? This one was cool as a cucumber. "I won't?"

"No."

"Why won't I?"

"Because you're a woman, Dr. Galpas, and women are more practical than men."

He knew who she was. Olivia felt the impact of her name on his smirking lips shiver all the way down to the backs of her thighs, raising the fine hairs there.

“How do you know me?” she whispered.

Rafe shrugged. “It’s a small village. You’re a beautiful woman. And a smart one,” he reminded her pointedly.

Obviously not, Olivia thought wildly. Smart women did not converse with bandidos in dark upstairs hallways while their almost-fiancés waited downstairs with fifteen armed men. Smart women screamed in situations like these, or at least fainted so they wouldn’t be held responsible afterward. Olivia considered both options.

Rafe watched her carefully, saw her eyes dart toward the stairs, measuring for the first time the distance between herself and safety. About time, he thought. Stupid woman, to be standing here talking to him.

“Too late, señorita,” he whispered, stepping from the deep doorway and taking her arm.

He moved so quickly that Olivia had no time to choose between screaming or fainting. One instant he was a shadowy figure several safe feet away, the next his hand was wrapped hard over her biceps and she was deftly turned and pressed back against his body. Her breath left her again.

Rafe slid his free hand to her throat. Stomach for it or not, he had to keep this woman from exposing him, at least until he got out of the house. After that, let her scream until she turned purple. It would only serve to further pique Cervantes’s pride and temper, having had the bandit who had been stealing from him invade his very own hacienda.

The operation was what mattered, and damn his weak knees. And whatever else was reacting to Olivia Galpas.

“Stop struggling,” he hissed in her ear, “and listen.” He ran his thumb along the base of her throat and let it rest in the hollow there, for his own pleasure. He felt the woman shudder in his arms and wondered briefly what it would be like to make her shudder from something other than fear. He shifted again, hoping she didn’t feel his arousal at her backside. “You can scream, you can run, you can alert every man in the building, and I will not leave this house tonight alive. That’s true.”

Olivia felt him shift behind her once more, prayed he’d moved far enough away that she wouldn’t have to feel his lower body against her again. She’d been shocked by his obvious excitement, terrified that he intended more harm to her than she’d assumed.

But he was clearly trying to spare...one of them, anyway, from whatever that arousal implied.

“But I won’t die alone,” he continued softly at her ear. “Do you really want to take the chance with the lives of your lover and his friends?”

Olivia thought to correct him on that count; Ernesto was not her lover. But then, she thought as his hand reached up to clamp gently around her throat, she had more important things than semantics to worry about right now.

“Do you?” he repeated harshly.

“No,” Olivia whispered.

“I thought not. I will leave when I’m finished, and no one will be hurt. Unless you make a mistake, señorita. The fate of these people are now in your hands. I urge you to make the right decision. Do you understand?”

Olivia caught a whiff of something as he breathed on her. Peppermint? Had this desperado brushed his teeth before breaking into the local sheriff’s house and crashing her going-away party? What the hell kind of bandit was this?

“When you’re finished?” she blurted with uncharacteristic indiscretion. “Finished with what? Are you robbing Ernesto? Are you the smuggler?”

Nosy, reckless woman. Rafe shook her slightly. “Do you understand?” he repeated, sounding dangerously provoked.

“Well, can you tell me how long you’ll be?”

Rafe nearly burst out laughing. “Doctor.”

Olivia nodded briskly. “Yes, yes, I understand.”

“And Doctor?”

“Yes.”

“I will kill him first. I want you to remember that.”

Olivia nodded again, swallowed hard. “Yes, I will,” she said in a strangled voice.

Rafael let her go, almost reluctantly. His head was buzzing from the contact of her body against his, his blood was running hot through his lower body, his fingers itched to touch the smooth skin of her neck a second time.

“One thing more,” he said through gritted teeth, suddenly as furious with himself as he was with her. For lingering, for getting caught, for finding Cervantes’s lover more arousing, more attractive, than any woman he’d met in years. For caring what happened to her.

Olivia’s chest was heaving, her body beginning to shake in reaction. She’d been in grave danger there for the briefest moment, but she was unsure exactly what the threat had been.

“What?” she breathed, her eyes locked on his.

“Get out of here as soon as you can. Get back to the States on the next plane or bus or vegetable wagon.” He reached out, gave a gentle tug on the long braid that had come to rest on her shoulder, running his thumb along the broad length of it. “I don’t know how much you know,” he said, almost to himself, “and I don’t care. Just get out.”

And while Olivia stood, trembling, wondering, the man disappeared without a sound down the dark hallway.

## Chapter 2

Olivia endured. That was the most she could say about the remainder of Ernesto's lavish party, his expansive hospitality, his determined and public attentions.

It had been a terrible mistake coming back downstairs. She should have taken the advice of the smuggler and fled the house, Aldea Viejo, the country. Let Ernesto think his shrimp had actually killed her. Oh, God. She clamped a hand over her mouth to keep from bursting into hysterical laughter.

She'd still been shaking when she'd stumbled down the stairs, even after spending another five minutes back in the powder room, splashing water on her face and muttering recriminations to herself in the mirror. But she knew what she had to do if she wanted to keep Ernesto and his friends from being splattered across the beautiful old plaster walls of the hacienda, so she pasted a smile on her face like a prudent little scientist would when faced with empirical data.

The lanky man with the smirk on his mouth and the hunger in his eyes was very probably taking a bead on Ernesto right this minute, waiting for Olivia to come to her senses and fall into a crying, squalling heap on the floor. Something she very much felt like doing, as a matter of fact.

It was midnight now, and Ernesto was calling for a toast. Thank heavens. After that was finished, she'd go straight back to the motel, wait sleepless until morning, when she would take a taxi—or a bus or a vegetable wagon—to La Paz, and then the first plane home.

A flute of champagne was pressed into one hand, while Ernesto pulled her gently to his side by taking the other. Olivia went willingly. No point fighting the inevitable. She would smile at the sure-to-be elaborate toast—then get the hell out of Dodge. She'd had enough Mexican hospitality to last her a lifetime.

Ernesto launched into his toast with full vigor. She listened with half attention and smiled politely at the beaming crowd. Where was the criminal, while these people quaffed expensive champagne? Slitting throats? Stealing silver? Pressing up against some other unsuspecting female with that steely body and that shocking arousal? She took a gulp of champagne and choked on it.

"And if she will do me the very great—" Ernesto paused for effect here, and Olivia smiled gamely up at him, her face beet red from suppressed coughing, trying desperately hard not to spew Dom Pérignon onto his silk suit, "very great honor of becoming my wife, and the mistress of this house and the mother of this humble village, I will be the happiest man on God's earth."

The crowd erupted. Olivia let go with a spasm of coughing that had Ernesto patting her on the back. When she was finished gagging on her hundred-dollar champagne, she looked blankly around at the people crushing in on her, then, stupefied, up at Ernesto.

"What?" she whispered.

Ernesto bent his head to kiss her. "Say yes, my darling," he said rather fervidly into her ear.

"To what?" she asked, spilling champagne on her clothes as someone jostled her from behind. She barely noticed. She had no idea what he was talking about. Had he just proposed? To whom? To her? In front of hundreds of people? With a sexually excited smuggler loose in his house?

Impossible.

Ernesto's smile went a little stiff. "You are shocked." He laughed heartily, though it sounded forced to Olivia's ears. "I am shocked myself. I have been a bachelor for almost fifty years."

"Ernesto, you can't possibly—"

He cut her off sharply. "But I had never met a woman who could share my house and my life before now, Olivia Magdalena Rosanna deRuiz Galpas."

Olivia almost groaned aloud. Not the whole name. He must be pretty damn serious if he was using her full name.

“You are a prize,” Ernesto continued in his beautiful voice. “A woman of education and family. The great-granddaughter of Don Ricardo Galpas of Chiapas,” he said loudly, though Olivia was sure he’d already mentioned that at least three times during the toast. “You will be the perfect wife for Ernesto Cervantes.”

At this show of bravado, the crowd erupted into cheers again. Olivia looked around, nearly bursting once more into hysterical laughter. The entire evening had been thoroughly surreal.

“Ernesto, we have to talk.”

He kissed her lavishly, his tongue breaching for the first time the seam of her lips. The man had just proposed marriage, Olivia thought, dazed, and he’d never even kissed her properly. She’d had a bandit pressed against her more intimately just an hour ago than this man had ever been. She’d never so much as tasted Ernesto Cervantes, who now fully intended to become her husband.

Olivia touched Ernesto’s shoulder to break the kiss.

He smiled down into her face, glowing with triumph. “I must attend to my guests, now, love.”

“We need to talk, Ernesto,” Olivia insisted. She needed far more time than three weeks to decide on a husband for the rest of her life, no matter how perfect the man appeared to be. And there remained the small matter of how she was going to explain to him that she’d had a friendly little conversation in his upstairs hallway with a drug smuggler but had neglected to tell him.

“We will.” He kissed the hand he’d been clutching. “We will.”

But they didn’t. Olivia wandered around in a daze for half an hour more, caught up in a bizarre frenzy of congratulation and speculation, while Ernesto seemed to carefully avoid her.

Fine, she thought. Their discussion of this bizarre public proposal would be better conducted when they were alone, anyway. Two hundred complete strangers and one smuggler whom she practically knew in the biblical sense were not conducive to a quiet chat about the future.

She looked at her watch. Almost one. Surely the smuggler or thief or whatever he was would be gone by now. Surely. Unless he’d been caught and was even now being beaten to a pulp by an enthusiastic deputy. Olivia shuddered slightly. The man had terrified her, but she didn’t want anyone beaten. Jailed would be fine. Where he could face punishment for his crimes and still get three meals a day to fill out those hollows under his cheekbones.

She slipped back upstairs while the mariachis played and the wine and tequila flowed. No one, she knew, would miss her. Ernesto was very busy being the host, the bridegroom-to-be, and the rest of the guests were having far too good a time to notice that the bride-to-be had absconded. She’d wait upstairs until the melee died down, and then have that little talk with Ernesto. Might as well, she thought. There was no way she’d sleep a wink tonight. No boring party she’d been to in the past two years had offered both an intimate moment with a criminal and a marriage proposal.

Just as she reached the second floor, she heard a heavy tread on the stairs behind her. She froze for a moment, panicked, expectant. Then it occurred to her that the bandit she’d met had not moved with such plodding thumps of feet and weight. Olivia doubted he made any sound at all, unless he wanted to.

A guest, then. Eeh. She looked around for a hiding place. She did not want to be caught in this dim hallway with one of Ernesto’s rowdy revelers. There was far too much clear thinking to be done to waltz through the niceties with a stranger. She opened the closest door and slipped inside.

The room was dark. Even the moon was shut out by gloomy, thick draperies. Olivia leaned against the door for a moment to catch her breath, then peeked carefully out into the hallway again. Wonderful. There was not one man, but three, all waiting for the bathroom. She closed the door again quietly.

“That was a very touching proposal.”

Olivia spun around. She could see nothing, not even shadows, but she knew the voice. Would recognize it until the day she died, she realized.

“Ay, Dios,” she whispered.

Rafe did not turn on any lights. He knew he couldn't be seen from outside—he'd closed the drapes himself—but he'd neglected to eye the distance between the bottom of the door and the threshold and didn't want to take any chances. He was sure he couldn't stand to look into her eyes, anyway.

"Have you come up to his bedroom, then, as a small treat before the wedding?"

"You said you were leaving!" she whispered furiously.

"I said, when I was finished."

"My God, how long does it take?"

"How long does what take?" Rafe asked, almost as amused with her as he was infuriated. Engaged, was she? To that murdering scum?

"I don't know! Whatever you were doing. Stealing. Smuggling."

"Smuggling?" Now she'd surprised him. What the hell did this woman know?

Olivia could have kicked herself. "Or killing people, whatever you do. Where are you?" she whispered hoarsely. "I can't see you."

"It's better, I think, if you meet him in the dark, princesa."

He heard her small gasp, relished it. It made him mad, knowing she had come up here to meet Cervantes, after that nauseating public proposal. Unreasonable that Rafe should suffer over something that did not concern him in the least. But he did. And he wanted her to suffer a little, as well.

Olivia felt the whirling in her head subside to a manageable spin, felt her stomach settle from the shock of his voice. She'd been certain he'd be gone from the hacienda by now. It had been hours. "Why are you still here? If Ernesto catches you in his house—"

"Don't worry, I'm leaving. You came up the stairs just as I was about to go down them."

"Down them? Are you insane? Anyone could have seen you."

"It's past midnight, Doctor. By my estimation, most of the people downstairs were too drunk an hour ago to notice if an elephant walked through the room."

"You promised me. You said no one would be hurt. Ernesto—"

His hand shot out from the darkness, startling her. She'd never even heard him move. His strong fingers clamped around her wrist.

"Stop calling him that," he said. "Do not call him Ernesto, as though you know him. You know nothing about him."

"No. You're right. It doesn't matter." She was frantic. If anyone caught them together, all hell would break loose. She knew this man would do what he'd threatened, and innocent people would be hurt. Maybe even Ernesto. Most likely Ernesto.

Olivia squared her shoulders. "Okay, now you listen to me. You have to go before he finds you here."

"And you will stay," he said flatly, coldly.

"What? Yes." Olivia shook her head to try to clear it. "What is the matter with you?"

"Why didn't you leave today with your people?" She was so close. So close. He bowed his head a fraction of an inch, breathed in the smell of her hair. He loved the faint scent of the sea on her, as though she never really left the water, as though it ran through her veins. "Why did you come here tonight for this farce of a proposal?"

"My people? How do you know about my people? And what do you mean, this farce of a—? Are you nuts?" she whispered fiercely, coming up on her toes to hiss at him. "Mentally deficient in some manner? You're a drug runner. He's the sheriff of Aldea Viejo. And you have the nerve to call my perfectly good marriage proposal a farce?"

"I told you, princesa, that he's not what he seems, and you'd be better off back in your little office at Scripps than down here, playing with men you know nothing about."

Olivia's eyes widened. "How do you know where I work?"

"I know everything about you. Including your obvious proclivity for madmen."

Olivia blinked into the blackness. She could feel his breath hot on her face, and looked up. Her eyes had become just enough accustomed to the stygian darkness that she was able to see the sharp outline of his uncompromising jawline, the white around his shadowy pupils. “He is not the madman,” she said.

Rafe leaned forward again, ruthlessly ignoring the scent of her, the nearness. His physical reaction to both. “You think I am?”

No. She instinctively knew that whatever else dishonorable and desperate this man was, he was not mad. Not in any sense of the word. “Of course I do,” she whispered.

The catch in her voice undid him. How dare she fear him, when it was Cervantes, with his elegant manners and his elegant mansion, who lived so well off the suffering of drug-hungry Americans? Rafe was the good guy. It didn’t occur to him how ludicrous it was to be so indignant that his cover was working well enough to fool even this brilliant, beautiful scientist.

He advanced on her, deliberately brushing his lean body against hers. She retreated step for step, until she was backed against the door. He pressed mercilessly into her and reveled in the small trembling her body made against him. He was undeniably aroused. “Maybe I am a madman,” he muttered darkly.

He caught her mouth with his, was elated when it parted for him, even though he knew her lips had fallen open in shock and not arousal. He swept his tongue seductively inside. It didn’t matter. Didn’t matter.

Olivia thought her head had been spinning before. Good heavens. She was being kissed—and quite skillfully—by a criminal! She knew what a prudent woman would do in this kind of absurd situation. A prudent woman would ignore whatever excitement insane danger evidently stirred in her blood, knowing it for the temporary, stress-induced mania it was. A prudent woman would not give in to weak knees and shocking, reckless, sudden arousal. A prudent woman would fight.

Olivia opened her teeth as wide as she could and clamped down.

Rafe lifted his mouth the instant before her teeth snapped painfully together. He rubbed his thumb across her mouth once, twice, watching the movement with his eyes.

“Don’t bite me,” he admonished gently, and kissed her again.

Olivia was stunned, not just by the soft admonition, but by the tenderness of the kiss. Did criminals kiss like this, with such soft intent? With such sweet breath, and small sounds of pleasure? Surely not. Criminals had foul breath that tasted of tequila, and they groped at innocent women, violently. They didn’t seduce with soft, sucking little kisses and careful, stroking hands and eyes closed so tightly.

Olivia’s eyes closed, too. So she could think, she told herself. So she could use her excellent, well-educated and analytical brain to get herself out of this preposterous situation. Out of this preposterous town, where men proposed marriage in front of hundreds of other people and bandits kissed like angels.

Oh, pull yourself together, she told herself, keeping her lips vised together despite the fact that the smuggler was now licking at them. Licking!

She felt her body flood in arousal, and was mortified. Such a physical reaction from such a cerebral woman. It was a bizarre case of chemical response, she knew. People in peril often reacted against character. She’d read studies in which women in very dangerous situations had formed relationships they wouldn’t normally consider...wow, was he nibbling her lower lip? Oh. Oh, dear.

Okay, okay, she didn’t have to be governed by a simple chemical reaction. So he knew how to kiss. He knew how to kiss...her. And so no one had ever kissed...her quite like this before. She was a scientist, for God’s sake. She could overcome plain old ordinary knee-jerk response, couldn’t she?

The smallest moan escaped her when the smuggler gave up on her mouth and moved to her neck.

Couldn’t she?

The doorknob turned at her back, and only then did she realize she was jammed against it. Her hands went flat against the bandit's chest, and she shoved as hard as she could.

Rafe staggered back, staring at her. Her mouth glistened from his kiss, and her eyes, in the darkness, glittered wildly. She was as turned on as he was, he realized, stunned. He'd meant to teach her a little lesson—and this was how she reacted? Crazy woman. He was reaching for her again, desperately, when he heard the small sound.

She swiped at her mouth, as Rafe stood, paralyzed, in front of her. For the first time in his life, he had no idea where to turn. His first instinct was to grab the woman and make a run for it. He knew the instant the thought came into his head, it was insane. He had to get out, and fast. But he could not leave her. Not with Cervantes.

"Olivia?"

It was Ernesto. Olivia put her hand over the doorknob at her back, and realized she had inadvertently pressed the button on the knob with her hip, locking him out of his own room.

"Yes?" she said, her voice ringing hollow and terrified in her own ears. Why was the bandit just standing there, watching her? She wanted to scream at him to go, but she knew Ernesto would hear.

"Olivia, open the door," Ernesto said sharply.

"Yes, all right, Ernesto," she said, but did not move. Her eyes were locked on those of the man who had just kissed her, whom she'd very nearly kissed right back. A drug smuggler, the worst kind of man. Mortification tightened her chest, and she struggled to breathe.

"It's dark in here," she called through the door, stalling for time. "I'm sorry, I can't find the light."

"It's next to the door," Ernesto said impatiently. He banged on the heavy door with his fist, making Olivia jump. "Why have you locked the door?"

"Go," she breathed. And in an instant, the dim outline of the man faded from her sight.

Olivia squeezed her eyes shut, popped them open again. She'd not even heard him move, had no idea where he was.

She fumbled with the door as long as she plausibly could, and finally got it open, allowing the light from the hallway to spill into the room. She resisted looking over her shoulder to make sure the smuggler was not standing behind her.

Ernesto frowned at her. "Why are you in my room?" he asked. "And in the dark, with the door locked?" He surveyed the large room carefully from the doorway, then moved past Olivia and stalked across the tile to the thick Aubusson carpet that lay beneath the huge, dark canopy bed. "Olivia?"

Olivia snapped her attention back to him. She, too, had been scanning the room. The bandit couldn't have simply disappeared; he had to be in the room somewhere.

"I'm sorry, Ernesto," Olivia said. "I came up to use the powder room and I stepped in here by mistake. I didn't even know where I was until I turned on the light. What a beautiful room."

Her breathing was steadier now, and she folded her hands in front of her demurely, hoping Ernesto would not notice that her breasts were full, her nipples peaked against the peasant blouse, her cheeks flushed. It shamed her, her irrational reaction to the smuggler, who represented everything in the world she condemned—but she would deal with that later. In the convent she fully intended to join the instant she got home.

"It is a beautiful room," Ernesto conceded, his eyes narrowing. He walked over to her. "Your hair is mussed. And your cheeks are pink."

"I...I was dancing earlier," Olivia replied with a laugh. "And I have had too much of your excellent champagne, I'm afraid."

He scrutinized her for a minute, then, seemingly satisfied with her excuse, smiled. "Have you been enjoying yourself?" he asked softly, taking a strand of her loosened hair between his smooth fingers.

"Very much," Olivia said brightly.



“And you like my house?”

“It’s everything a house should be, Ernesto,” she said sincerely. “You have exquisite taste.”

His face relaxed even further at the compliment. “I’m flattered, though I must admit I have decorators. I have never had a wife to advise me in matters of the home,” he said easily.

Olivia felt that prickly sensation at the back of her neck again. For heaven’s sake, now what?

Oh, Lord. How could she have forgotten? Not an hour ago, this handsome, intelligent, well-mannered and propertied man had stood in front of two hundred of his closest friends and announced he wanted to marry her.

Funny how the kiss of a bandit could make you forget the important things in life.

“Ernesto, let’s go back downstairs,” Olivia said, tugging on the sleeve of his beautiful suit. This one might just be Armani, she thought as her fingers slid over the fine fabric.

Ernesto stood his ground. “No, Olivia, not just yet,” he said, his voice husky. “I like your hair after dancing. After we are married, we will dance every night before bed. It makes you look like a wanton,” he finished with a small smile.

Which is just what I am, Olivia thought grimly. Only not with Mr. Right, here. With Mr. Utterly Wrong.

“Ernesto, we must talk about your proposal,” Olivia began.

“We will, querida.” Ernesto took her hand from his arm and drew her gently toward him. He took her chin in his hand. “I know there are many questions in your head, about your work and your duties here. But these questions will have to wait. Now, we have time only for this.” He dipped his head, grazed her jawline with his lips.

He smelled of expensive cologne and expensive champagne. Olivia fought back a repulsed shudder, and wondered why the perfect man made her want to run in the opposite direction, while the last man on earth she should want could seduce her with nothing more than his voice in the darkness.

“You look so beautiful tonight, in your Mexican peasant clothes,” Ernesto murmured. “Have I told you that?”

“Ernesto, your guests—” she protested weakly.

“We will attend to them in a moment, Olivia.” He banded one strong arm across her back and drew her against him.

He was partially aroused, and Olivia again had to bite back the urge to flee.

“Do you realize, this is the first time we have ever been truly alone together?” he breathed, nipping at her earlobe.

Olivia squirmed slightly, but when Ernesto seemed to take the small movement as encouragement, she went stiff in his arms.

“We are not alone,” she said as reasonably as she could. “There are two hundred people here.”

He laughed softly. “Outside then, where our guests will not interrupt us.”

“Not our guests, Ernesto,” Olivia said firmly. “Your guests.”

His hand drifted to her breast, squeezed. “Our guests soon enough, my love,” he whispered, then took her mouth with some fervor, pushing his tongue past her lips.

Olivia was too shocked for a moment to respond one way or the other. But soon enough her instincts kicked in. She protested the kiss against Ernesto’s mouth, but the sound was muffled, and even to her it sounded like a whimper of passion. Ernesto gripped her breast, pinching at the nipple, and ground himself against her.

And then, so suddenly she couldn’t comprehend it, he was gone. She rocked on her feet, holding out a hand for balance.

The other man stood before her now, breathing fire. His chest was heaving and his dark eyes were slitted until she could see nothing but black pupils. For a moment, he simply glowered at her, wordlessly accusing her. She felt an absurd contrition, as though he’d caught her cheating on him.

He turned to look at the man sprawled on the floor.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Rafe sneered at his mortal enemy.  
At the man who had killed his brother.

## Chapter 3

Ernesto stared up at him, his flushed face a mask of angry confusion. “Who the hell are you?” He raked Rafe’s simple clothes with an experienced eye. “You were not invited to this party.”

“No.” Ernesto began to rise, but Rafe put a foot on his chest.

Olivia noted he was wearing black running shoes—of distinctly American origin.

He slid his foot toward Ernesto’s throat. “An oversight, I’m sure,” he added casually. “My partner and I attend most of your parties, after all.”

Ernesto’s eyes went blank in bafflement, then slowly narrowed as he caught Rafe’s meaning. “So you are the infamous Rafael,” he said between his teeth.

“You know my name,” Rafe said mockingly. “Very good for three months’ work, hefe.”

Ernesto spared Olivia a quick glance. “You will pay for what you have done, *cabrón*.”

“What I have done tonight? Or what I have been doing for months, without you having the slightest idea how to stop me?” Rafael laughed acidly. “I best you at every turn, *señor*.” Rafe removed his foot, stepped back and readied himself for the attack he was eager to meet. “It seems to me that you pay, Cervantes. Not I.”

Predictably, Ernesto launched himself at him, and Rafe caught Ernesto’s head full in his gut.

Olivia heard the air rush from Rafael, heard Ernesto grunt at the impact, but other than that, they made little noise.

It was instantly, horribly ferocious.

Olivia could scarcely comprehend the violence that erupted, as if by some mad sorcery, from both of them. It seemed unfathomable that Ernesto would so hate the man before him. Wasn’t he just another criminal, just another smuggler?

And the man Ernesto had called Rafael? What possible motivation could he have for the enmity flashing like deadly daggers in his dark eyes?

Whatever the explanation, Olivia knew instinctively that this was no ordinary fistfight between a lawman and a lawbreaker. This was something much uglier—and one of them would die at the end of it if she didn’t do something to stop them.

Rafael was younger, faster, tougher, but Ernesto outweighed him by fifty pounds and used his weight mercilessly, keeping his head lowered and battering at Rafael like a bull. Rafael efficiently countered by raining swift, brutal blows to Ernesto’s handsome face whenever the opportunity arose. It was a nearly silent, intentionally deadly bloodbath, and Olivia had never before seen anything like it. Had never imagined there could be anything like it.

Ernesto thumped heavily to the ground, catching Rafael around the knees as he fell. Rafael’s black shirt came untucked from his black jeans, and Olivia gasped when she saw the small, shiny gun Rafael had shoved into his waistband. She prayed, for Ernesto’s sake, for the sake of everyone in the hacienda, that the man would not remember it was there.

She watched in horror as Rafael brought his arm back and slugged Ernesto square in the face. Blood spurted gruesomely over his fist as he drew back for another blow.

No, he wouldn’t remember the gun, Olivia thought. He seemed determined to kill Ernesto with his bare hands. She bit back a scream. Rousing assistance at this point would be fatal to at least one person in the room. Olivia calculated the odds that it would be her or Ernesto, and decided not to take the chance.

Cervantes ducked the fist coming at his face, used the momentum of Rafael’s body to slide himself out from under the younger man’s straddle. In a blur, they both whipped to their feet—Ernesto’s nose gushing blood; Rafael’s jaw clenched, his breath coming in short puffs from the body blows he’d received.

Each holding a gun in his hand.

Olivia did scream then, in shock and dread, the short sound rising unexpectedly from her throat. Neither man looked in her direction.

Rafael grinned at Cervantes, though the pain in his chest was excruciating. “I’ve wanted your blood on my hands for a while now, Cervantes,” he said hoarsely.

“I will soon have yours on mine,” Ernesto retorted thickly, his voice sounding as though he had the worst kind of cold. “No man steals from me.”

Rafael smiled. “I’m surprised. It’s very easy to do.”

Ernesto swiped at the blood on his chin, smearing it grotesquely across his swelling jawline.

Olivia heard footsteps pounding down the hall. Two hundred people, law-abiding friends of the local sheriff, would be upon them at any moment. They would kill Rafael where he stood—and all three of them knew it. Ernesto began to smile, blood showing in the spaces between his perfect, white teeth.

Olivia would excuse her rash behavior later by telling herself she acted without thinking. But she did think. As clearly as she ever had in her long and thoughtful life. In the split second she knew she had before Ernesto’s men came through the door and put at least fifteen bullet holes in the man who’d kissed her, she decided to save his life.

Not because she understood what he did to make his way in the world, not because she liked him, excused him, had hope for him. But simply because she could not allow another human being to die in front of her eyes if she had any way of stopping it. She hadn’t known that about herself, exactly, but in that instant she saw it with perfect clarity.

Olivia knew Ernesto no longer remembered she was in the room, and suspected the smuggler had forgotten her presence, as well. She threw herself in front of Rafael just as the door burst open, grabbing his free hand and bringing it to rest at her throat. She heard his loud grunt of pain as she gripped his hand there and began, imprudently, shrieking like a lunatic.

The men barreling through the doorway stopped dead, staring first at Ernesto, then at her and Rafael, then back again. But the momentum of two hundred curious dinner guests propelled them into the room, along with the dozen people behind them. A minute later, there were more than twenty citizens of Aldea Viejo in Ernesto’s lavish bedroom, gaping at the bloody, dramatic, noisy tableau the three of them made. Olivia closed her eyes, still wailing theatrically, and thanked God.

Rafe saw stars. When the woman had wrenched his arm up, he was sure a rib had gone straight through his lung. But he was still breathing, still standing, and though he could barely do either, it was enough to convince him he was still alive.

It took him just a moment to divine the doctor’s foolhardy plan, and he tightened his hold on her fractionally. “Stop screaming,” he hissed in her ear. “They get it.”

She quieted instantly, nearly sighed with relief. So, he understood the plan. Excellent. Maybe everyone, then, would get out of this charming hacienda alive. Including her.

“Stop where you are,” Rafe said to the crowd, so menacingly that even Olivia shivered slightly. He carefully shifted his free hand until the gun was pressed against Olivia’s temple. He glanced down briefly, saw her pulse beat under the barrel of his gun. He cocked his weapon, for effect, in the sudden silence of the room. “I will kill her,” he said, his voice flat.

Several of Ernesto’s well-dressed female dinner guests gasped at that threatening statement, but the men in front, now just a few feet away thanks to the press of the inquisitive crowd behind them, were silent. Olivia, for her part, was beginning to wonder if she’d had some sort of brain-debilitating stroke. When the man named Rafe had cocked the gun, she’d realized just how disastrous one moment’s impetuosity could be.

No choice now but to go on, though. If she turned back now, he’d shoot her through her malfunctioning brain.

She whimpered noisily and snapped her head up, as though Rafael had tightened his grip at the sound. “Ay, Dios,” she breathed dramatically. She watched one man swallow hard and look to Ernesto for instruction.

Rafe almost laughed. He was barely holding her. Even if he hadn’t been suffering from what he was certain was at least one cracked rib, she could easily have escaped him by simply stepping out of his reach and into the waiting arms of Cervantes’s thugs. Instead, she was hamming it up for their audience, and saving his hide by doing so. If he hadn’t wanted to throttle her for letting Cervantes grope her earlier, he would have kissed the top of her head.

He glanced over at Cervantes, who was standing, albeit unsteadily, with his gun still leveled at Rafe’s head. Cervantes glared at Rafe for a moment, taking his measure, then jerked his head at his henchmen.

“Get out,” he snarled.

“I don’t think so,” Rafe said quietly. “I think we’re leaving, instead, if it’s all the same to you.”

Ernesto was visibly seething. Olivia could practically see his blood simmering behind his swollen eyes, could clearly see the struggle he was having to keep himself in check. She half expected smoke to come out of his nostrils at any moment.

On the one hand, he very probably wanted Rafael dead more than he wanted another sun to rise in the morning. On the other, he had announced in front of his entire town, his family and dozens of honored guests that the noted Doctor Olivia Magdalena Rosanna deRuiz Galpas of the famed Scripps Institute of Oceanography was to be his wife. Any risk he took with her safety would be noted, reported and discussed, on both sides of the border, for years to come.

Please, Olivia prayed silently. Please, Ernesto.

Finally, Ernesto’s trembling hand lowered, the gun coming to rest at his side. He did not take his eyes off Rafe.

“Let her go,” he said hoarsely. “I will guarantee you no one will touch you if you let her go.”

Rafe smirked. “Forgive me, señor, if I do not trust you.” He pressed the gun more tightly to Olivia’s temple. Her head tilted to the side, and she whimpered again. Good girl, he thought. “Drop your weapon.”

Again, Olivia waited, breathless, while Ernesto decided how much of his pride he was willing to sacrifice for her. Enough, she noted in relief as the gun clattered to the floor. Ernesto nodded at his men, who grudgingly laid down their guns, as well.

“Now,” Rafe said calmly, “since I assume the rest of your boys here are armed, I’ll just ask Señorita Galpas to escort me out of here.” He looked down at Olivia, saw her face had gone another shade of pale. “Señorita?”

Olivia shot a last look at Ernesto. The blood coming from his nose was slowing to a grisly trickle that skirted his full upper lip to drip to his jaw. Olivia willed him not to do anything. Though she had put herself in this position of her own free will, she had no desire to get shot over one moment’s deranged impulse. And Rafael would shoot her, she was pretty sure. He might have the mouth of an angel, but he was still a drug smuggler, and Olivia was certain “ruthless” was part of the job description.

Besides, she thought dizzily as he pulled her none-too-gently backward through the parting crowd of party-goers and household staff and grim-faced deputies, if he didn’t shoot her, someone else would in the riot that would surely follow.

Heaven help her, what had she done?

Rafe’s hand had tightened on her throat, and she realized she’d stopped moving.

“No cold feet now,” he said in her ear. “This was your idea, princesa, so move it.”

She stumbled against him again and allowed him to half drag her to the stairwell. He backed himself against the thick plaster wall and began stepping sideways down the stairs, Olivia trying to

match her tread to his. He grunted softly at every step, and Olivia could feel the short breaths he expelled against the skin of her neck.

Like automatons, the people on the stairs, who had not been able to squeeze into a space in the crowded hall, parted silently in front of them. Those who had been in the hall and in the bedroom followed their slow progress down the stairs with their eyes. No one spoke, no one moved. Only Ernesto came through the crush of people to follow them.

Rafe watched him carefully, his eyes scanning the rest of the dinner guests briefly every few seconds. Olivia was starting to balk, giving him another thing to worry about.

Tough luck for the princess, Rafe thought. She'd put herself in the middle of this drama. And if she changed her mind now, they were screwed six ways from Sunday. She'd be hurt in the cross fire, possibly killed. And as furious as he was over that disgusting scene in Cervantes's bedroom, he wasn't about to let a bullet meant for him hit her. She'd just have to go through with the charade. He'd figure out what to do with her once he got her away from the hacienda.

"Only a little farther, princesa," he whispered.

"Don't call me that, you psycho," she hissed back. It was the worst epithet she could think of, though she'd spit it out in English so he probably wouldn't understand it, anyway. Dammit.

"Olivia!" Ernesto shouted to her as they reached the wide, welcoming front doors of the house.

Olivia stopped, forcing Rafe to stand behind her. She knew from the way he was breathing in her ear that he probably didn't have the strength to drag her out if she didn't want to go. She looked up at Ernesto, felt a horrible pang of regret. He looked anguished, enraged.

"Ernesto," she said quietly, and for the first time felt Rafael tighten his grip on her. "I will be all right."

"I will come for you, Olivia," he said dramatically, and Olivia had the strangest sensation he was speaking not to her, but to his enthralled guests. Come for her? Surely he did not think this drug runner would keep her. The bandit would be suitably grateful for her saving his life and he'd let her go. He had to. She had a plane to catch in the morning. She had a job to go back to.

"I will kill you for this, Rafael," Ernesto shouted, as Rafe passed through the front entrance.

Rafe didn't bother to answer. He pulled Olivia out the door after him, and after a quick scan of the compound from right to left he grabbed her hand and started a painful, shuffling jog down the front steps.

"Let me go, now," Olivia said, pulling at the hand that gripped her. She was grateful to have the barrel of his gun pointing at the ground now instead of at her temple, but she wasn't grateful enough to let this go on any longer. "Listen, you, let go of my hand."

"Not yet, sweetheart," he said grimly. "Look around. We've got company. Now come on."

Olivia glanced quickly around the pretty yard. There were people everywhere. In the darkness, she couldn't tell who was pursuing them and who was simply observing their bizarre exit from Ernesto Cervantes's party, but Rafe gave her no time to figure it out. He ruthlessly dragged her in his wake as he left the wide driveway in front of the house and melted into the scrub around the manicured yard.

And melted was the only word for it, Olivia thought. If she hadn't been attached to him, she'd never have believed he could move so quietly and efficiently. Wouldn't have believed anyone could.

"Where are you going?" she whispered. It did not occur to her to scream out their whereabouts to potential rescuers.

"Where are we going, princesa," he corrected breathlessly.

"I said, don't call me that," she snapped furiously.

"Be quiet. You make as much noise as five regular women, I swear," he muttered. He could hear thrashing behind him, knew Cervantes's men were just hitting the brush. At least, with Olivia tagging along, they wouldn't shoot at him. Or let dogs loose on him. He'd been chased more than once by dogs in the barrio, usually after he'd performed some moderately illegal act. He hated being chased by dogs. It made the hair on his neck stand on end.

“How many ‘regular’ women have you kidnapped?” she demanded. Personally, she thought she was holding up pretty well.

He didn’t bother to answer, just dodged hard left, dragging Olivia along pitilessly. Both of them hunched over to make themselves invisible in the low, thick brush. He tucked the gun into the waistband of his jeans and wrapped his free arm around his chest. It didn’t help much, but at least he didn’t feel as though he was going to pass out.

They made their way in that odd, shuffling, walk-jog for what seemed to Olivia like an hour, though when she looked back at the lights of the house she knew they hadn’t gone nearly far enough for Ernesto’s men to have given up the chase. She wondered, as she caught her sandal on another prickly clump of sagebrush, if any place on earth would be far enough.

They reached a road, or what passed for a road in this part of Baja California. Rafe paused, still keeping his death grip on Olivia, and studied the terrain. He cursed quietly.

“Yes,” Olivia said encouragingly. “This looks very bad. We’ll never make it at this pace. You must go on without me.”

“Shut up, will you?”

“I’m slowing you down. Leave me here. You’ll make better progress without me.”

“If you don’t stop yanking your arm around, Doctor, I’m going to pull it out of the socket and drag you through this brush on your butt,” Rafe said sharply.

Olivia peered through the darkness at his face. He looked ghostly pale despite the run, and she realized he’d been holding his chest as though to keep his internal organs from spilling onto the desert floor.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing. Be quiet,” he growled.

She glared at him. “Very nice,” she said, her breath coming out in gusts after their flight. She waved wildly in the direction of the hacienda. “I just saved your ass back there, if you weren’t paying attention.”

His head whipped around, and Olivia was instantly sorry she’d poked at the wounded beast.

“I was paying attention to everything you were doing back there,” he said through his teeth. “I was certainly paying attention when you let that son of a bitch put his tongue down your throat and his hand on your—”

“He’s practically my fiancé,” Olivia said rashly.

“The hell he is,” Rafe muttered, and started walking again. He pulled her roughly along when she slowed. They crossed the road and dove back into the low, sand-swept cover. This time, they headed west, toward the foothills.

Olivia stumbled along as best she could, every few minutes or so experimentally tugging at her hand, which was still clamped firmly in Rafael’s. “Are you going to tell me where we’re going?” she asked again after a while.

“No.”

“Ow,” she said loudly as her sandal snagged on a rock, peeling a strip of skin from the side of her big toe.

Rafe didn’t so much as glance back at her exclamation or slow his pace. “Quiet.”

“I think you just ripped off my toe.”

“You wear stupid shoes,” he muttered, though the first glimpse of her small, slim feet in those strappy sandals back in that dim hallway had made his mouth water. “I’m surprised you have any toes left.”

“I didn’t know I was going to be kidnapped tonight or I would have worn something more sensible.”

He stopped, turned very deliberately to her. “I didn’t kidnap you, princesa,” he said, and watched the light of fire come into her eyes. Good, it would help propel her the rest of the way up

this mountain tonight. When Bobby discovered Rafe had never made it back to the beach camp, he'd meet them there. Rafe and Bobby had worked out a contingency plan weeks ago, before Dr. Galpas had ever come along to ruin his mission and his destiny and possibly his life. "You tossed yourself into this whole mess headfirst."

"What was I supposed to do—let Ernesto kill you?"

He snorted. "You think he could have killed me?"

Olivia gaped at him. "He had a gun, you moron."

"So did I."

Olivia threw her free hand in the air. "Are you stupid? What makes you think he wouldn't have shot you first?"

Rafe shrugged. "I'm faster."

Olivia hoped a derisive snort would let him know her opinion of that bit of lunacy. When he appeared unfazed by it, she decided to make her point more forcefully. "You're not the sharpest tack in the box, are you."

Rafe glanced over her shoulder. He could see men fanning out into the scrub around the hacienda. "Keep your voice down."

"You may have been faster, but you were in his house," she continued in a furious whisper. "Without me, you never would have gotten out alive."

He looked down at her. Her mouth was swollen—from the bastard's kisses, he thought sourly. Still, he could think of nothing he wanted more than to pull her into his arms. She had saved him. She was far braver than he ever would have given her credit for. Far braver than any woman he'd ever known. Not that he'd tell her that.

"Now is not the time to congratulate yourself, princesa," he said into her ear. He bit down on her lobe, making her gasp. "If you don't start moving your butt up this mountain, your efforts will have been for nothing."

"Why are you holding onto your chest like that?"

"I think your boyfriend broke me," he said shortly. "Let's get moving."

"He broke you? He broke your ribs?"

"Yes."

"Oh, my God. How many?"

"I don't know," he said. "My X-ray vision is on the blink."

"Let go of my hand. Let me feel."

He eyed her suspiciously. "I don't think so."

She hissed at him like a snake.

"You're not that kind of doctor, anyway," he said. The truth was, he didn't want to let go of her hand. He couldn't have explained it, but he felt that if he did, she'd disappear into the desert and he'd never see her again.

"No, I'm not that kind of doctor, but I can help you if you let me, you dufus."

The American slang sounded incongruous, preceded as it was by a long stream of furious Spanish, and Rafe had to bite back a smile. Dufus? He couldn't think of a Spanish equivalent. Now, psycho—

He let go of her hand, then realized his was sweaty and wiped it down his pant leg.

"Lift your shirt."

He gingerly lifted his black shirt, and heard her gasp.

"You look like you've been hit by a truck," she said in English.

He watched her curiously as she bent over and ripped the bottom half of her long skirt along the slim strip of embroidery that attached it to the top half. She straightened.

"What are you doing?"

"Applying first aid," she said.



“With your dress?”

“Well, I could take off my bra and snap it to your chest, but then you’d have a lot to explain to your cell-mates once Ernesto throws you in jail.”

She clamped the bottom of her skirt to his chest with one hand and began wrapping the material tightly around him.

“If you don’t hurry, he will throw me in jail,” Rafe said, sucking in his breath as she touched a sore spot.

“I’m hurrying, I’m hurrying, you ungrateful pain in the neck.”

He heard her mutter in English, and he smiled over the top of her silky hair.

“Good thing I was wearing a skirt like a proper damsel. Good thing I’m not a respected scientist or anything. Then this would be absolutely absurd. Oh, if my parents ever find out about this... Oh God, and Dr. Eames—at least he won’t make me do any more press conferences—” She tucked the end of the fabric into the wrapping and stood back. “There,” she said, switching to Spanish again, proud of herself.

“Thank you.”

“I don’t have to go with you.”

He put his chin on his chest to check her bandage. Good field dressing. “Yes,” he said. “You do.” He moved experimentally. His ribs did feel slightly better. They’d be able to move much faster now. Before she could think to run, he clasped his hand over her wrist.

“No, you’ll be safe now,” she insisted. “I’ll go back down the mountain, divert their attention, tell them you went in the opposite direction.”

It made perfect sense, Rafe knew. And he wouldn’t have let her do it in a million years. She was not going back to Cervantes. Not only did the thought of the bastard touching her again make Rafe nuts—for some ungodly, Neanderthal reason that he’d need a psychiatrist and an anthropologist to explain to him—but Cervantes was one slip-up away from being taken down by the United States Drug Enforcement Agency and a half-dozen cooperating Mexican law enforcement organizations. No way was Rafe letting any woman, willing accomplice or not, rush back into a situation as volatile as that. His mother would murder him.

Olivia Galpas had saved his life tonight. And she was an American. A spoiled and wealthy American who had an obvious knack for getting herself into trouble, but an American nonetheless. She deserved some consideration from a DEA agent such as him.

“You’re coming with me, Doctor,” he said.

Olivia put her foot down, such as it was. “No,” she said quite firmly—even barked the word, she might have said. “I am not.”

Rafe leaned forward. “Once again, princesa, you’re wrong.”

Suddenly, his head whipped up like that of a wolf scenting prey, and she heard the sound of men coming through the desert.

“Come on,” he said, and began to run.

Olivia had no idea when the bottoms of her feet began to bleed, or when the blisters on her heels popped. Or when the moon came up. Or when the wind died down and left the desert quiet enough to hear the small animals scurrying home at their approach. Her world had winnowed down to the hand in hers and the mountain in front of her.

He let her stop for a while once during the night. But just for a few minutes, and even then he did not let her take off her sandals.

“I’m beginning to be very sorry I didn’t let them kill you,” she muttered at him in English, while he stared off into the distance, obviously trying to pinpoint any men who might be following them up this godforsaken hill.

She thought she saw him smile, but decided that was impossible. He had never spoken a word of English. His clothes, his speech, his Spanish dialect all told her he was a peasant; she was sure he

did not speak English. Which was good, because she'd been muttering at him in English for most of the hellish trip up the mountain, and she fully intended to mutter at him until he let her go or until one of them died of heat exhaustion or pursuing lawmen or bloody feet.

He made her get up after a short rest and follow him again up some indistinct trail to some obscure place only he knew about and only he could imagine. All Olivia could see was rock formations and low brush, the silhouettes of barrel cactus and dusty, endless sand. And behind her, far in the distance now, the Sea of Cortéz shining in the moonlight.

She cursed at him in English all the way up the mountainside. If his chest hadn't been so sore and his mood worse, Rafe would have laughed at her. The esteemed doctor knew some good, dirty American swear words. His mother would be shocked. He imagined her mother would faint dead away.

They reached the predetermined meeting place just as the sky lightened. They'd left any pursuers far behind, but Rafe knew it was only a matter of time before Cervantes and his goons picked up their trail in the bright light of a Baja California day. He turned just as the sun seemed to break the surface of the gulf. In spite of everything, the sight took his breath away.

Olivia sat on a rock and watched him. She hated to admit it, but he was sort of...beautiful, actually. His eyes were tired, and seemed to her to be tinged with some vague...regret. His gorgeous mouth was relaxed as he breathed in the morning air, his edgy face showed shadows, softening the angles into something almost artistic. Her mother would kill to paint that face, Olivia knew.

"Why do you do it, Rafael?" she asked.

He turned to her. "What?"

"What you do." She saw his eyes narrow, but kept hers steady on him. "Run drugs."

His face went expressionless. "Is this what your lover told you?"

"He told me there were two men in the area, bringing drugs from the mainland through Aldea Viejo. From his reaction to you in that bedroom back there, I'm just assuming you're one of them."

"I'm one of them," Rafe said.

"Why?"

Rafe ran a hand down his face. Working undercover meant lying. Lying to everyone. Telling the good doctor he was a common bandit. He could not take a chance that this extraordinary lovely woman would reveal his secret. She could easily return to the arms of Cervantes, tell him the DEA, not common thieves, were trying to catch him red-handed in his own crimes. Cervantes would surely pull back then, lay low, become impossible to prosecute.

Rafe watched the sun rise another minute, trying to come up with a convincing reply. With thoughts of her lifetime of privileged status, he asked, "Have you ever been poor, Doctor?"

Olivia shook her head.

"Then don't question why my people do what they do to put food in their mouths." He turned back toward the gulf, scanning the hillside for any sign of Bobby.

"What your people do hurt my people," she said.

"Americans?" he scoffed. "Americans can't get enough of what Mexico has to sell them."

"It doesn't make it right. It doesn't make it legal."

He ground his teeth together. He wanted to end the lie, to tell her of his obsession to stop the real drug runner. To agree with her in every way. To make her see him as a man of honor.

Choking back the truth, he shrugged, knowing his cover had to remain top priority. "A man like me," he said slowly, carefully, "is nothing but the smallest fish. A small fish does little harm." He gazed across the morning haze to the spot where he knew Cervantes's house sat. He couldn't see it, but every sumptuous carpet and ornate piece of furniture and thin crystal glass stood out in sharp relief in his mind's eye. "You should worry about the sharks, Olivia. Sharks prey on the poor and the addicted, and they grow wealthier and wealthier with each passing year. They are not struggling

to feed their families. They are killing your high school kids to make themselves rich. You, of all people, should know how much damage a shark can do.”

“You try to excuse your actions by telling me you’re only a small dealer, insignificant in the wave of drugs that comes across the border.” It made her angry that he would dig for any excuse at all. “But you are a part of it—you and whoever your partner is. You are still in the wrong.”

Her tone infuriated him. She was right, of course. He’d spent his entire adult life dedicating himself to stopping the flow of drugs between the two countries—but to hear her condemn him made him crazy.

“What do you know about right and wrong, princesa?” he said, putting every ounce of disdain he could manage into his words. “I don’t imagine you have had to make any real decisions about right and wrong since the day you were born.”

“Are you kidding me?” Olivia jumped up, her aching, oozing feet forgotten. “Do you think because you were born poor and I wasn’t that you have had all the moral decisions to make?”

He nodded slowly, enraging her further. She poked him in the chest, ignored his wince of pain. “Well, I have news for you, amigo,” she said. “I make moral decisions at every turn. Do I marry to please my parents and give them the grandchildren my culture and my hormones demand, or do I make my own way in a man’s world? Do I work myself to death, or let my father’s money help me slide through? Do I hold onto my cultural heritage with both hands, or bleed into the Anglo life to make things easier on myself? At every turn I have chosen the right path. How dare you accuse me of not knowing the difference between right and wrong simply because you have chosen poorly.”

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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