

HE BELONGS TO MEXICO

She hooked up her horse, Ned, to the buckboard. Before stepping up, she straightened her blouse and skirt and shifted the holster housing her .44 to a handy position. It was six miles into town, down a dusty road that had never improved over the eight-or-so years she'd lived in the cabin by the spring. The spring was how she'd come to stay here. She'd bought the place after the failed stagecoach route had given it over to auction. Travelers continued to use the route because good water was scarce.

It was a lonely existence, but she preferred loneliness to the aggravation that seemed to come with any long-lasting relationship with a man. The last man had left after only six months. She thought of all these experiences that had webbed through her life and supposed they made her the woman she was. She wasn't getting any younger, and she longed for a child. She tapped a rein to Ned's rump and sped him up into a slow jog. Her long dark braid bounced down her back. She reached up, tightened down her sombrero and cast her gaze over her shoulder toward the western hillside. Behind her the jagged peaks of the Sierra Madres towered, hazy with dust that swirled skyward. She was ever mindful of the possibility of strangers.

She tipped her broad-brimmed hat to folks on the boardwalks as she came into the small town of Dusty Bend, and pointed Ned toward the general store. The horse didn't need direction. He was used to waiting there. When she stepped down from the buckboard, she tied Ned and went inside, the little bell above the door tinkling.

“Well, Hello Sandia,” Bill Watkins called from the back of the store. “It’s good to see you.” Portly, middle-aged Bill came from around a long wooden counter to greet her.

“The prickly pears around my place are a good rich purple,” she said. “I’m supposed to let Martha know when they’re ready. She wants them for jelly. We wait too long those stray Mexican cattle will come through and clean out every last one.” Bill laughed just as his wife stepped through the back door.

“I heard that,” Martha grinned. “I’m ready anytime you are.”

Bill frowned. “I don’t want you good lookin’ women out there in the desert by yourselves picking cactus berries.” Bill was a big man but didn’t look a threat to anyone. “Those blue eyes of yours, Sandia, would attract any lonesome cowboy.”

She knew Bill was being a gentleman. “It isn’t like we’ve seen a stranger in months around here,” Sandia said with a laugh.

“And I’m forty, Bill.” Martha gave her husband a playful punch in the belly. “Not exactly a spring chicken.”

“Sandia there is the chicken and there are plenty of roosters drifting through. I think I’ll go along. It won’t hurt to lock up the place for a day. By the way, Sandia, that book you ordered is in.”

The look of mild frustration left Sandia’s fine oval face and was replaced with one of rapture. “Wonderful!”

“You sure do read a lot.”

“I love reading about other people’s lives.”

Setting three across on Sandia's buckboard seat, they headed toward the foothills of the Sierra Madres. "They're just beyond the big arroyo, by the boulders." Sandia pointed southeast.

Bill frowned. "Ain't that Mexico country?"

Sandia shrugged. "Never gave it much thought. No one comes here," she said and squinted into the sunlight.

"Maybe we should give it thought, Sandia," Martha said.

Sandia laughed. "The spot I'm thinking of is only another fifteen minutes."

"Yeah," Bill shrugged. "We're here, might as well enjoy this fine day."

They carried burlap sacks, tops spread wide to catch the pears they hit with sticks so that they wouldn't chance a barb. Ned was tied loosely to an ironwood tree that provided shade down in the arroyo. They each had about half a sack of pears when a herd of Mexican cattle moseyed up the arroyo, bellowing and looking for afternoon shade. It was Ned's whinny that made Sandia drop her sack and hurry back toward him. Ned was now pulling to get free from the aggression of a mother cow. Not seeing any safe way to get rid of the cow, Sandia shot two rounds into the air to scare her. The herd turned away.

It was then that the vaqueros appeared. Coming fast around the turn at full gallop, sombreros flying, the man in the lead dressed in tight black leather vest, matching pants, silver shining, his clothes traditional and clearly expensive. He rode a handsome black horse. Bridles and decoration jingled and glinted in mid-day light. This was all too much excitement for Sandia's old gelding. Now free, he pulled sharply left and hauled the buckboard and himself toward home at a gallop.

“Damn!” Sandia screamed. The Mexicans reined in, laughing. That is, all except for the handsome man who scowled down at her and poked her shoulder with the barrel of his rifle, bringing her attention to his dark, accusing glare.

He jerked his head toward the other two men. “Put this one on board behind me,” he yelled. Silver flashed again as his horse danced around her. The stranger’s intimidating stare knifed down into her. “You’re trespassing,” he said. She didn’t reply.

Ned was gone. There was no chance to head home at all.

“Get the other two,” he ordered once Sandia was aboard.

“You’re kidnapping us?” Sandia complained.

A skinny Mexican said, “Senor, this man is pudgy.” He pointed at Bill. “He will lame my horse.”

The head man growled, “If that happens, shoot the horse and walk.”

They arrived at a low-slung hacienda surrounded by ironwood trees and catclaw and creosote bush. The formidable leader let her slide off the big horse without assistance. He moved behind her all the way to the hacienda as if still herding his cows. Once inside, he pushed her into a dark room and slammed the door. She heard the lock turn from outside. There was a small table that held an oil lamp, which she lit with a wooden match that lay there. The room had no window and only a narrow bed against a wall.

When the man came back she said nothing, but took the water he offered. “Still don’t feel like talking, Senorita?” Her light eyes knifed into his. “Suit yourself,” he said and was gone.

After an uneasy night, he came again. “You’re welcome to freshen up. I will show you the way and one of my men will wait in the hall outside the door in case you decide to try to leave us.”

When he returned, he smirked. “I have been courteous and shown you great hospitality. Now it would pleasure me if you would administer liniment to my back and shoulders. I have been breaking wild horses and I am not as young as I once was. Also, I prefer a female’s touch. My cook saves her hands to make bread.” Amusement lit his eyes and she again glared at him. “You are a beautiful woman. It is too bad we cannot be friends.” He said, “Come with me.”

The man led her off to a room with a long hard-wood bench. A shelf was pushed against one wall and lined with tiny bottles. She said nothing to him. And he reciprocated by not conversing, but handed her a bottle of oil to use. She had no choice.

He took off his shirt, taking great pains to fold it over the back of a straight chair. She willed her mind blank as she sometimes did when riding up into the hills where she would peer out over the empty vastness. This she had practiced and this she brought to herself now. She massaged the stranger’s back and shoulders until her fingers ached.

Later, when she had rested, the man came to her again and ordered her back to the same room with the table. Expecting the same routine, Sandia retrieved a bottle of sweet oil and watched as he stripped off his shirt and lay down on the bench and turned onto his stomach.

His voice muffled, he said, “I could have killed you for trying to shoot my cattle.”

Her mind not yet settled into its void, anger flared and she threw the sweet oil across the room where it hit the wall and splattered. She spat, “I shot to scare a cow that was trying to gore

my horse. That cow was mean. If I'd been shooting to kill her, she would be dead and you'd have reason to kill me."

"Even in anger you have a pretty voice," he whispered.

She pushed back loose hair that had fallen onto her forehead and she bent to her task again, fuming over the man's audacity. What was it to her, if this man had a penchant for back rubs and no intelligence to determine who was a cow killer and who wasn't?

She sighed and rubbed his back. Without realizing, her breath caught as she watched the well-formed muscle roll beneath her kneading fingers. Her touch prodded between bone and muscle. Smooth russet skin gave way to her plying fingertips. A soft groan of pleasure escaped him.

He was muscled from hard use. She wondered about his life and about the things that he knew, wondered about all that he'd seen. His dark hair smelled of lemon water and curled along the nape of his neck, and his skin smelled of fresh cut grass.

While she was thinking all these things her hair, now loose from exertion, fell around her face. She was startled when he rolled over and stared up at her. Brown eyes knifed into blue as he reached up and pushed back her loose, damp tendrils. His hand gently cupped the back of her head and he pulled her face to his and kissed her thoroughly, expertly; a thoughtful, lingering kiss. She did not resist, and this, too, shocked her. Her heart hammered in her chest. This was no inexperienced cowboy. This...she had never experienced. In one swift motion, he swung from the table, scooped her up and carried her to his bed in an adjoining room where he slowly undressed her without taking his eyes from hers. In her heart she realized that this was a man intent on what he wanted and confident that he would get it.

"I will forgive the mess you made with the oil," he said and smiled.

Naked, he was as beautiful as the chiseled sculpture she had once seen in a book.

His lovemaking left her sated and spent. When he rose and turned his back to pull on his breeches, she whispered, “You aren’t going to shoot me?”

“No.”

“Do you always get everything you want?” She didn’t see his smile.

“Why have you not asked my name? All women want to know their lover’s name.”

“You are not my lover. I am a woman you took.”

Turning, he drew back. “Please,” his eyes tightened on her, “you were a cooperative participant who has the unfortunate habit of running men off.” He looked around. “This is my hacienda. I’m not leaving and you can’t run me off from what is mine.”

She inhaled sharply and sat up, pulling the cotton sheet around her. “You’ve been spying on me?” He smiled. Finally, she said, “A name is to be remembered only if the individual happens to be someone of importance that you care about.” He looked away, but not for long.

His dangerous glare stilled her. He said, “You read many books, yet you don’t know yourself. I could help you.”

She scoffed, “This is how you help?” Her sarcasm contradicted her feelings, because for the first time in her life, she was filled with doubt. Still, she knew he was toying with her. She asked, “What of my friends? Are they alive?” Her heart thudded with dread when she saw him run his tongue around inside his cheek. His jaw clenched and unclenched.

He inhaled and walked toward the open double window, his back to her again. He looked out toward the Sierra Madres. “I own fifty thousand acres. I own this hacienda. Three hundred men work for me. I run five thousand cows on my land and you don’t care what my name is.” He turned back toward her. “You are the woman who lives at Bonito Springs, Sandia Johnson.”

“Yes.”

With force, he continued, “The spring belonged to my family once long ago.” He poked out his chest and straightened his shoulders. “I could claim that land. It was part of my country.”

She frowned. “Before that it belonged to the Apache, and before that to God. It’ll one day belong to God again, because I’m certain humans are only temporary on this earth—but let’s talk politics and spiritual beliefs after you tell me what you’ve done to my friends.”

“Don’t be insolent,” he said, but not in an unkind way.

Sandia moved to the edge of the bed and drew on her shirt. “I’m merely worried about my friends. If you’re any kind of a good man, you will tell me how they are. We weren’t hurting your damned cows, we were picking prickly pear for jelly, for Christ’s sake.” She pulled up her split riding skirt and tucked in her shirt. He watched her every move.

“You are lovely. You have wonderful hands: capable, soothing.” He reached out and traced his thumb across her cheek. “You have the face of an angel, and yet, you are stubborn beyond belief.” He turned from her and looked out the window again. “Your friends are fine.”

“When can we leave?”

“I’m considering what to do with you.”

She scoffed. “You are considering what to do with me? You don’t want to keep me. Being insolent is only a fraction of the trouble you would get by keeping me.”

He spun toward her and rocked back on his still bare feet. “I would have something to look forward to, then.”

“Like you, I do what I want to do.”

He nodded. His voice as soft as a feather’s touch, he said, “Yes...I can see you would be trouble. But, just so you know, you can return to me at any time. If only you were different,

perhaps we could have married.” He bowed in kingly fashion, only lacking velvet cape and crown.

He gave each of them a horse with his apology. She looked at him from aboard her new horse and asked, “What is your name?”

He laughed. “Now that you’re going home with a gift, I am important enough?”

“You’ve surprised me,” she admitted and lowered her eyes. And because, no matter how much she denied it, she felt something between them.

“I am Elias Salvador,” he said, and again bowed in that royal fashion. “I hope your horse and buggy made it home.”

Sandia also carried the gift of life back to her beloved Bonita Springs. When their son was born, she named him Elias Salvador Johnson. Elias was a beautiful baby and he grew strong and looked so much like his father that at times, in certain light, the uncanny resemblance gave Sandia chills. She had never lied to her son. He knew his father was only hours south.

Now, at fifteen, Elias wanted to know his father, but Sandia could tell him no more because she knew very little of the man who had bedded her at thirty. The event itself was a secret pleasure she had held close all these years.

Then, as if called, Elias Salvador himself rode up in front of her cabin, leading another saddle horse. Her heart thudding, she screamed at her son to stay in the house, but her boy had looked out the window and gone anyway. Her son was no longer a boy to be held by a mother’s command. How could she blame him?

A graying Elias Salvadore nodded. "Sandia, it is good to see you. You have aged well." He sat back in his hand-tooled saddle, leather creaking, and looked over the rest stop. "This place has been cared for with a loving hand. My ancestors would be pleased."

She stood, hands on hips, glaring at him. "You're not here to talk about the blue bells I planted."

"No. I am sorry." She believed him. His face now looked pained, his sensuous mouth down-turned, his dark eyes somehow drooping. "I've come for my only son. He is of age and needs his father to show him the land that will one day be his."

She swallowed. Elias his only son! How could this be? This was a man of stature, a man of wealth who could have any woman and should have many sons. Her body shook with realization, her hands sliding from her hips.

He looked toward the Sierra Madres, but his gaze came quickly back to her and the boy. "He looks like me. I would have you, too, but..." He shrugged.

She gave a faint smile. "I'm willful."

He said, "I've honored your wishes. But, I have a son and I will have him now."

An unnecessary command, because his son also wanted him. She would give her son the same freedom she had been granted. He belonged to Mexico.

Sandia reached up and tousled her son's dark hair. "Take care of yourself and him. I love you both." She watched him run to the horse his father had led in behind his own.

"You are welcome at the hacienda, Sandia. I think it is not good to live alone."

As they left, her gaze followed the faint mirage that was her son and the only man who'd ever cared for her.

THE END