

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I Thought it was a Drug Cartel

Friday, August 10, 2007

Mexico City, La Pedregal District

The pounding, metal on metal, sounded frantic, and now I could hear high pitched screeches.

Ani drew his gun. “Try the door.”

“It’s electronic. Help me find the panel.”

My heart thundered in my chest as I scanned the walls surrounding the metal door. Rock; nothing but rough rock. No, wait—wires.

“Ani,” I shouted, pointing to a thin black cord running a couple hundred feet into the shadowy recesses of the cavern from the door and disappearing behind an industrial shelving unit. I bolted to the unit and found a fuse box. Which switch?

“How do I know which switch?” I said.

Anibal yelled, his voice eerie as it bounced off the rock, “Leave it alone; the noise stopped. It’s a machine in there cycling. Maybe the ventilation system. We don’t want to turn that off.”

“You’re wrong.” I felt it in my bones. “Try the grate again—it’s what set them off before,” I called back.

“Let go of it Jade.” His voice held a warning. I decided to ignore him and trotted back to the door, brushing him aside. I rattled the peep-gate and produced the shrill scree of metal grating on metal. The metallic banging started up again. I stood on my tiptoes and pressed my ear to the opening. Faintly, a harmonic counterpoint to the beat-less drumming, I heard human voices and spun around to face Anibal.

“It’s people. Listen,” I pulled him toward the aperture.

He leaned down and put his ear to the opening. The banging petered out. I sawed the narrow flat cover in its groove, the discordant squeal of a beginning violinist pierced the cavern—and sure enough, the pounding started again, louder.

“It’s women—no, Dios, Dios!” Anibal stepped back, his hands thrown to his head, his voice a croak, “It’s children.”

A wave of nausea burned up my gullet and I tasted bile. “Kids?”

“Stand back, Jade, I’m going to shoot the door open.”

I staggered into action. “No, Ani, too dangerous. Help me figure out which switch it is. I can follow it into the box—come on.” I grabbed his hand and tugged him toward the fuse box.

“We need a circuit tester. You can’t figure it out without testing—or flipping all the switches.”

“Look,” I said and flung open the cover. “Here’s the wire coming in. It’s the only one like it.” The box looked old, industrial. It reminded me of a rat’s nest, fibrous and matted together—except for one new-looking black cord that ran into the box with the bundle of raveling, fiber covered wires and snaked down through the rows of terminals and breakers and disappeared. “What happens if we flip the wrong switch?”

“Well, that’s the question, isn’t it, Jade.”

“What could happen?” I probed the box with the eraser-end of a pencil I’d fished out of my purse. “What’s this? Shine your LED here,” I tapped the lip of the hinged cover.

He shined a concentrated beam of light into the cover. “*Pues*, who would have expected it to be labeled?” He flipped the bottom left circuit breaker. A bare bulb mounted over the locked door shown green. The heavy door rumbled in its track as it opened. The banging and cries of voices were clearly audible as I ran toward them.

“Jade, stop. Stop. We have to clear the room. Follow me.” He said, his gun ready.

I drew my Glock and followed Anibal into another cavern much smaller than the meth lab and illuminated with glaring florescent tubes. He crouched, and cautiously surveyed the room. No one was there, only the piercing din of metal pounded on metal. I couldn’t bear the screams and yelling that radiated into the harsh-lit cave. This is what hell sounds like. I hurried past Anibal and racks of cardboard boxes toward a small slate colored door. I barely noticed the worktables arranged in the center of the room.

“Jade, look at all the money!”

I glanced around and saw a dozen tables covered with bound bundles of paper money and several machines that I guessed ordered the loose bills into stacks, since one had a hopper filled with U.S. bills. The king was in his counting house, counting all his money. Then it hit me. The stench. The caves had smelled musty and damp as we entered, but here, by the door, I smelled the stink of misery.

Anibal caught up to me. “Dios, what’s that smell?” He yelled over the incessant clanging.

The air was heavy and thick in this part of the cave. The ventilation system must not reach this far into the tunnels.

“We’ve got to get them out. Hurry!” I tapped my gun against the door. The clanging stopped. I tapped again. “We’re going to get you out of here.”

Anibal shoved back the old fashioned bolt and, gun drawn, pushed open the door. A cloud of vile stench billowed over us. I stepped back and yanked my shirt over my face. If it sounded like Hell, then this must surely be the odor of Hell: vomit, feces, urine, rotting food, dirty bodies, blood—I gagged and choked my breakfast back into my stomach.

Several naked bulbs dimly revealed a low cave, about the size of my living room back on the Sarasvati, maybe twelve feet by twenty feet. The uneven rock floor held mattresses and jumbles of bedding and clothes and, in the midst of the tangle, cowered a couple dozen filthy children, now silent, squinting into the beam of Ani’s flashlight. I threw up.

Twenty-four blackbirds baked in a pie. Their ages ranged from tiny, four, six? To near adult—fifteen or sixteen. I wasn’t sure as the little ones hid behind the protective arms of several skinny, haunted-eyed girls. The prettiest of them, both girls and boys, were near naked in dirty shifts and briefs. The others, mostly girls, reminded me of the children I’d seen all over the city selling Chiclets or newspapers, washing windshields, begging. Dirty, tattered, and often wearing the satiny pinafores or plaid *batas* matching their mothers and grandmothers, also begging or selling trinkets or foodstuff on busy streets. But these kids also wore the dull expression of despair.

“That bastard. That sick bastard. I’ll get him for this,” my partner muttered, clenching and unclenching his fists.

My voice quavered. “Who are they? How did they end up here? I thought it was a drug cartel.”

My blood thundered through my veins, pumping anger throughout me so forcefully that I was afraid I might fly apart. Ani thought his half brother, Senator Aguirre, was involved in this—did he traffic in more than drugs? I'd never felt like killing anyone before, but I was staring at evil, and murder seemed too good for whomever left these kids here to die.

“We've got to get them out,” I said.

“Jade, we're in real danger here. They won't just leave them, or the money. If someone flips that fuse—”

“—Who are you?” I asked in Spanish.

Twenty-four pairs of eyes bored into me, but none of the kids spoke. Their fear palpitated in the heavy, oxygen starved air. I lowered my gun and Anibal followed suit. A collective sigh escaped from the group and they all began talking at once. When the pie was opened, the birds began to sing.

I heard Spanish, something Slavic sounding, an Asian dialect, and Oh my god! English, in a distinctly Californian accent. I turned toward the American accent. An older girl, blond and shapely in her frilly nightie, clung to a budding, curly-topped ten or eleven-year-old girl in soiled panties and a thin camisole.

“What are you doing here? How did you get here?” I almost shrieked.

The girls cowered and the older girl mumbled, her nails digging into the soft flesh of the younger, “Help us, please.”

I inhaled a deep breath of the foul air and forced myself to calm down. These kids needed help, not an hysterical woman scaring them more than they already were.

I looked at Anibal, who had made his way to the other side of the cave and squatted, cradling a tiny boy, and whispering to the knot of children surrounding him.

“We'll get you out of here and back home,” I said.

But how were we going to do that?