

THE FLYING Z

**Also by Leo W. Banks**

*Double Wide*

*Champagne Cowboys*

*.45-Caliber Perfume*

# THE FLYING Z

LEO W. BANKS

 **BRASH**  
BOOKS

## CHAPTER ONE

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The rider picked through the tangle of mesquites, ducking and twisting to avoid the thorny branches. When he emerged from the thicket, he stopped on the dirt of Morales Road and studied the rock ridge to the south. By his calculation, the smugglers were ten minutes away, surely less if they hurried.

He looked west along the road at the woman walking toward him. He'd seen her earlier while scanning the hills with binoculars and rode hard to get closer, all the while thinking she'd recover her senses and turn back.

But she hadn't, and he felt certain alarm.

Watching her, his breath quick in the high-desert cold, he said, "Whoever you are, ma'am, you have no idea what you're walking into."

The rider sat his horse and waited. He had big hands and a handsome face, although his jaw, slightly off-center and marred by a scar, brought the matter into dispute. It had clearly been broken. The skin around his eyes showed fine wrinkles from time spent in the sun horseback. He had three days of whiskers, and his eyes, a striking black, were often remarked upon for their intensity.

He had on a red snap-button shirt, a canvas range jacket with the collar up, and black Ramírez boots that had walked through mud and worse. His shaggy black hair hung beneath the brim of his beat-to-hell hat.

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At that distance, only the woman's cowboy boots stood out. The sun hit them and sparkled from some silver ornamentation. From that alone he knew she was not from the Arizona borderlands, for no woman born of that place would wear such boots.

He had seen women wearing similar varieties on his infrequent visits to the city, guessed them to be in style, and like most things of current fashion, considered them unworthy of his time. He knew, too, that no woman aware of the trouble that had come to that country would risk walking alone.

The land had always been home to rattlesnakes, but in recent years it had filled with men who acted like them.

Listening hard, the rider heard nothing and wasn't surprised. The ridge would block the smugglers' sounds even as they moved closer.

Morales Road went up and down, hid for a stretch, reemerged, tilted with the ground, and hid again. Beyond the road and for miles around, the tan hills rolled out, covered with brush and pancake cactus, one hill after another separated by deep draws that swallowed the ground, all the country looking hard and forbidding under the November sky.

The woman came into view again. Certain now that she wasn't going to turn back, the rider could wait no more, and he couldn't leave her. The Mexican border was two miles south. Having jumped the line, those mules were free. No churches or mothers in sight. Nothing to hold them back in a dangerous no-man's-land.

The rider blew into his hands and spurred Lobo closer.

Now aware of the approaching *clop-clop-clop*, the woman hopped on her toes and waved. "I broke down!" she called and skipped to a trot. "Thank God you came along. My car's stuck back there. Can you give me a push or something?"

"Right now we need to get you out of here and fast," the rider said.

She pulled up short and gave him a confused look. "Excuse me?"

He reined his horse around and found her a most pleasing sight. She had a model's face, fresh and shining with youthful good health. Her eyes were a rich green, the skin smooth with rose circles on the cheeks.

Her long hair was a shiny chestnut color, an uncommon shade in that region. Her mouth was wide and full, her lips curling up at the corners. She wore a gray bolero jacket over a simple white shirt. She carried a shoulder bag with the image of Ralph Lauren's polo player embossed on the side.

"There's some men going to be topping that ridge any minute," the rider said and pointed. "Best for us to be gone when they get here."

"What men? What're you talking about?"

"Ten of them in camos backpacking loads. Their boss has a rifle and wants more than anything to get his shipment through."

"Rifle? Oh, you mean hunters."

"Mules. Drug smugglers."

"Drug—what? Like in the movies?"

"Like right here. No previews, no popcorn."

She gazed up at the ridge with worried eyes.

He reached down. "Grab hold and jump on back."

Her mouth took a stubborn bend. The rider noticed her boots. They were worse than he thought, a pale red, snakeskin, and he was right about the silver decoration. The sequin inlay began at the toes and wrapped around the sides. They probably cost \$1,500 at a store in Santa Fe with "coyote" in the name.

Good for crossing the street to the next nightclub, not much for working stock. Even with the boots, she wasn't taller than five foot three.

The rider said, "I don't recommend standing here talking things over." He leaned down and wiggled his fingers. "Let's go."

"Let's go? With you?" The look on her face said she'd scarcely encountered an idea so disagreeable.

"Ma'am, it's best you do what I say."

"Ha! I don't think so, mister."

She stomped the dirt in protest and accompanied her performance with the last words in her vocabulary. Nothing the rider hadn't heard before or barked out himself several times before breakfast. But he didn't often run into women with such skill for the spoken word.

"Do you always cuss that way?"

She stared up at him. "Only when I need to."

From the top of the ridge came a man's voice, followed by others in quick succession, all in Spanish and in tones that spoke of serious business. The woman stiffened and threw her arms out in frustration.

"I don't even know you. Where are we going?"

"My ranch is down the road." He reached closer. "I'll ride you clear of those men."

The words soothed her, even though she balked at the idea of needing anyone's protection. The voices on the ridge grew louder. She huffed in frustration as her mind raced through her options, which were exactly none.

"Dammit all." She stuck her foot in the rider's stirrup and grabbed his wrist. She had a strong grip, and even with that bag on her shoulder she looped her leg over Lobo's back with ease. She sat as far back as she could without sliding off the hind end.

"Scooch up and put your arms around my waist," the rider said.

"I will not."

"Do it or you'll fall off."

"For the love of God."

She muttered foul oaths as she wrapped her arms around his middle. The rider spurred and Lobo lurched, and together they galloped down Morales Road.

## CHAPTER TWO

The rider kept Lobo running hard until they were clear of the smugglers. Slowing to a trot, he leaned over and spat out a mouthful of getaway dust.

“Lovely,” she said in his ear. After a long pause and finding the silence hard to withstand: “I’m assuming you have a name.”

He reached his hand over his shoulder. “I’m William Juan Zachary. Nobody calls me anything but Will.”

She gave him a three-fingered handshake, the most she was comfortable sharing. His rough skin felt like rotting wood. “I’m Merry.”

“Merry. You mean like happy?”

“Most of the time. I’m afraid today’s an exception.”

“Do you have a last name or is that a government secret?”

“O’Hara. And you don’t have to be so smart.”

“Can’t help it, Merry O’Hara. How’d you wind up out here?”

Not eager to recount her embarrassment, Merry waited a beat to begin. She told a winding tale that started with her acceptance at Harvard, continued through four years of study, and ended with her recent graduation and her parents’ gift of a refurbished 1966 blue Ford Mustang convertible.

She’d accepted a fellowship to study for her PhD in English at Stanford and was driving across the country to Palo Alto.

After listening to talk meant to sanitize her blunder, Will said, “Harvard, eh? Guess they don’t teach you how to make up good stories.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You didn’t break down. You drove off a road you shouldn’t have been on in the first place, and your car’s still back there, high centered and going nowhere.”

“You’re not going to spare me any embarrassment, are you?”

“That wouldn’t be any fun.”

“I hope I don’t sound cross.”

“We’ll unravel this predicament before you know it.”

“I’m usually more agreeable when I careen into a ditch.”

“Lucy Garcia should be along soon,” Will said. “She cowboys for me and runs the tow truck and junkyard in town. What I can’t figure, you didn’t find this road on anybody’s map.”

“I’ve never seen a border town and was trying to get to Nogales. Well, eventually. This was a detour.” Merry had a husky voice and some kind of accent too faint to identify. “I wanted to see the country. I’ve never been to the far West.”

“I’ll pretend I’m surprised.”

“It looked interesting. You know, the road not taken? Robert Frost?”

“This country’s made for poets all right. But the stupid ones don’t live long.”

Merry passed over the insult. She fished through the shoulder bag to retrieve her cell phone. She held it over her head, turned to hold it behind her and to all the compass points. No signal anywhere.

“The worst day in human history continues.” In desperation, Merry shook the phone, as if that would help, and looked at the screen again. “Really? No bars? Go ahead and remove a limb, why don’t you.”

“You might get lucky on the rise behind my barn. It’s a hike to get up there.”

“I’ll just use your landline, if you don’t mind.”

"Don't have one," Will said.

"Does your cell work around here?"

"Had one of them once but folks kept calling. Check between the cushions."

"Good Lord. Where the hell am I?"

"Paradise."

Merry harrumphed. "Looks like nowhere to me."

To her, it must've seemed the very picture of nowhere, for his ranch was set in the deepest part of southern Arizona, a lost place called Cabezas Canyon. They rode at an easy canter up through roadside chaparral and scrub oak. Lobo struggled up the incline, snorting and high-stepping on the hard-packed ground.

Will felt Merry sliding away behind him. "Get close or you'll land on your rump."

"You can forget what I might land on."

"Have it your way, ma'am."

"Why do you keep calling me ma'am? I told you my name."

"Manners, a bad habit of mine. Been working on it."

"There's nothing to hold on to. Anyway, I'm plenty close now, Will. If I can call you Will?"

He couldn't resist the mischief and said, "I prefer Mr. Zachary."

That made Merry mad. "Well, *Will*, I'd be fine sitting close, but you're covered in dust like I've never seen. Where do you live anyway?"

"Right here." He pulled back on the reins and pointed.

Merry peered over his shoulder into the depths of Cabezas Canyon.

"That's it? Way down there?"

Will's house was a 150-year-old adobe set in a clearing of Mexican oaks, the branches bare with the coming of winter. It was faded white and needed a paint job. Smoke curled from the roof pipe. The tin porch slanted over rough-hewn mesquite poles.

In spite of rebuilds and three fires, the house still had visible bullet holes where patches in the original adobe had worn off. The walls were eighteen inches thick and had rifle ports from the days of the Apache depredations.

Beside it on one side stood a water tower, and on the other a corral made of salvaged railroad ties. Behind the corral was the barn, its roof consisting of mismatched metal sheets held down with old truck tires.

Merry felt better. She'd arrived at an actual settlement, and however rudimentary, it put her that much closer to getting back to civilization.

Morales Road circled Cabezas Canyon and a narrow spur curled to the bottom from there. With no risk of breaking any bones, she gripped Will's shoulders as Lobo stepped slowly down.

At the ranch entrance stood a carved-wood sign: *¡Bienvenidos!* A second sign of welded black iron formed an arch over the cattle guard: *The Flying Z*.

As Will tied Lobo at the corral, he heard the racket of Lucy's tow truck on the canyon rim. "Looks like we're in luck. She's heading home already."

Lucy Garcia drove a cream-colored rust wagon of a truck with *Lucy's Tow and Junk* hand-painted on the side. Tow chains rattled all the way down the spur. Lucy poked her head out the driver's window. She had long hair gone prematurely white, and a face of paper-thin skin and hollow cheeks.

"I take it you're the one called Meredith Breck O'Hara?"

Merry startled. "How'd you know that?"

"I checked the registration on that silly rig you left back there."

"It's a vintage Mustang. Hold it, you went through my car?"

Lucy opened the driver's door and sat sideways on the seat. She wore a long-sleeved white thermal undershirt, a red

lumberjack shirt over it, and orange construction boots. The bottoms of her jeans were rolled up, showing three inches of chalk-white legs not much wider than a garden hose.

She tapped some tobacco into a rolling paper and smoothed it with a greasy finger. "The one you was driving on that blasted road, I sure did."

"We've already been through my unfortunate episode."

Licking the paper, Lucy said, "You must be slow."

Merry looked at Will in astonishment, and back at Lucy. "I think we've established my mistake. Now, if you could pull me out of that hole, I'll be on my way."

"You ain't going nowhere with a busted axle and a busted radiator."

"Great. You checked it already?"

"That's only half of it." Lucy stuck the burning cigarette in her mouth. The rising smoke didn't hide her satisfied smile. Her teeth were a here-and-there proposition. "It's a for-sure mess. I won't know what else is wrong until I get it up on my lift, which I can do afore dark if we hurry along. Ain't much light left in that old sky."

Merry made a face. "What luck, you're a mechanic, too."

"Only one between here and Tucson that does work such as this, and it won't be cheap." Lucy held up her hands to head off further discussion. "But I don't handle money, any economic, er"—Lucy struggled to find the word. "What do you call 'em, Will?"

"Transactions. Told you a hundred times."

"Yeah, transactions. Now, it'll take a while to get the parts shipped in and probably a few days to do the work and like that. But we got a motel in town that Roger just painted and cleaned up nice. If you don't talk too much, I'll go ahead and drive you there, and we'll hook up your rig on the way."

"Well, if Roger cleaned," Merry said, but didn't budge.

She wasn't interested in Lucy Garcia's offer. Will had an extra bedroom and told Merry she was welcome to it. She knew right away she'd accept his offer, but for propriety's sake, she didn't jump at it. After pretending to think it over and letting a proper amount of time pass, she agreed and thanked him for his generosity.

"If you could just take me back to the Mustang to get my bags," Merry said.

"They're in the truck." Lucy pointed with her black thumb.

"You took my bags?"

"Figured you didn't want no undesirables messing with your stuff."

"Nope, I certainly would not want that."

Will broke in and said to Lucy, "See any tourists on the Canyon Trail? I tracked a group all morning."

"Seen 'em," Lucy said. "Jazzy was leading 'em again, armed as usual. He's been making that run for a month now." She started the truck and gave Merry an impatient look. "Don't wait for me, dearie. I ain't no porter."

With a hard grinding of the gears and the engine sputtering, Lucy let the truck roll forward. Merry snatched her bags out of the flatbed just in time, and with a suitcase in each hand, she watched Lucy's truck roll over the cattle guard coughing black smoke.

"She's a sweetheart," Merry said.

"Best cowhand ever rode this ground," Will said. "Come in, I'll get you settled."