

[PDF] Shattered (Bitter Creek Novels)

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Description:

About the Author Joan Johnston is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of more than forty award-winning historical and contemporary romantic novels, including her Bitter Creek series featuring *The Rivals*, *The Price*, *The Loner*, *The Texan*, and *The Cowboy*.

Johnston received a master of arts degree in theater from the University of Illinois and graduated with honors from the University of Texas School of Law at Austin. She lives in south Florida and Colorado. Visit her website: www.joanjohnston.com.

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. "Why are you here?"

Private Investigator Harry Dickenson felt a shiver roll down his spine at the sound of Wyatt Shaw's quiet, raspy voice. Shaw stared at him from ruthless gray eyes, his lean, powerful body coiled behind a stone-and-glass desk, like a silent predator stalking unsuspecting prey.

Harry wondered if the rumors he'd heard were true. Was he alone with a brutal killer? Someone who'd, literally, gotten away with murder?

Harry's blood felt like ice in his veins, despite the heat of the April sun streaming through a wall of windows. He was standing on the top floor of the newest, and by far grandest, Shaw Tower, a combination hotel, condominium and office building in downtown Houston, Texas. From his vertigo-inducing perch, Harry could see the far-reaching geographic boundaries of the city, nearly forty miles away.

It was hard to believe how much of that real estate was controlled by the indecently wealthy man sitting before him. Was it so wrong to want a little piece of that pie for himself? This was Harry's first venture into extortion, and he was a little nervous. But he was certain Shaw would pay—and pay well—to learn the tantalizing secret he'd come here to sell.

Harry tried to meet Shaw's piercing gaze as he made his demand for cash, but he couldn't quite raise his eyes that last six inches. He focused instead on the crisp collar of Shaw's white shirt, the smooth knot of his patterned blue silk tie and the lapels of his dark blue blended wool suit, as he said, "I have information of vital interest to you."

"I'm listening," Shaw said.

Harry saw a flicker of movement over his shoulder and realized they were no longer alone in Shaw's office on the Tower's 80th floor. He started as a man two or three inches taller than Wyatt's reputed 6'4", and maybe fifty pounds heavier, stepped into his line of sight.

"You wanted me, Boss?" the man said, speaking to Shaw as though Harry wasn't there.

Harry wondered how the gargantuan man in a cheap brown suit—who reminded him of the enforcers he'd seen in Mafia movies—had been summoned and realized Shaw must have hit some button on his desk. He thought back to the female secretary in the outer office. The older, benign-looking lady in a skirt that fell two inches below her knees and sensible pumps had made him feel perfectly safe coming into what he could now see was a cage of steel and glass from which there was no escape.

Harry licked at the sweat above his lip, recognized it for the anxious gesture it was and stiffened his spine. He was the best at what he did precisely because he didn't allow himself to be intimidated.

Nevertheless, he felt his bowels shift in an instinctive animal response to mortal danger.

"I'll be with you in a minute," Shaw said to the big man he'd summoned. Then he fixed his steely gaze on Harry. "You were saying?"

Harry watched as the big man guarding the door, who had an ugly scar on his cheek and a crooked, many-times-broken nose, took a pose that reminded him of a military man "at ease," his meaty hands behind his back, his tree-trunk legs spread wide. The enforcer's dark eyes, under heavy black brows, stayed focused on Harry as though he were some lower form of life, a bug this big man would like to squash.

Harry mentally shook his head. He was anticipating trouble where there might be none. Shaw had done nothing overtly threatening. It was the information Harry had dug up on the man sitting across from him that was scaring him shitless.

Harry fought the urge to turn tail and run. He chided himself again for letting his imagination run wild. Surely Shaw would be grateful to hear what Harry had discovered, even if he was also shocked by the revelation.

"I want your agreement to pay before I tell you what I know."

Harry waited for Shaw to ask what it was or how much he wanted or refuse to pay or say something that would give him an idea where to go from there. He'd never suspected, when Governor Pendleton had hired him to hunt down the biological father of her daughter-in-law's twin sons, that his search would lead him to this enigmatic man.

He'd brought a picture of Lucky and Chance, in case Shaw asked to see them. The boys had blue eyes and black hair like their mother, Kate Pendleton. And were long and lanky, with square chins, strong noses and high cheekbones like their father, Wyatt Shaw.

Harry hadn't believed his luck when he'd finally stumbled on the truth. The governor had mentioned a reunion her son and Kate had attended in Austin at the Four Seasons. The trip would have been around the time of the twins' conception, nine years ago. Shaw hadn't been as well-known then, but the brand-new receptionist at the hotel, who'd taken his American Express card at the Austin, Texas, Four Seasons that fateful night, had become the current manager of the hotel.

The incident had remained fixed in her mind because it was the first of the new Centurion Cards—a black AMEX card with supposedly unlimited credit— she'd ever seen, and it had been handed to her by an extraordinarily good-looking young man with silver wings in his black hair.

The manager told him that when she'd recognized Wyatt Shaw with his infamous father on TV less than a year later, she'd marveled at how close she'd come to flirting with a dangerous criminal. She'd admitted to being jealous, that long-ago evening, of the strikingly beautiful woman holding the handsome man's hand.

And yes, she'd confirmed, the lady in the photo Harry had shown her was the same woman Wyatt Shaw had taken with him on the elevator to the penthouse suite he'd booked.

Harry had quickly realized he'd stumbled onto a gold mine. He could get paid again and again to keep his mouth shut about the information he'd discovered: Mob Boss Dante D'Amato's bastard son, Wyatt Shaw, was the father of Texas Governor Ann Wade Pendleton's grandsons.

Governor Pendleton, who'd hired him, would pay, of course. He could also sell his willing silence to the twins' very wealthy great-grandfathers, who'd probably fork over a hunk of money to keep the world from knowing who their granddaughter had screwed while she'd been married to another man.

Jackson Blackthorne, Kate Pendleton's paternal grandfather, owned a ranch the size of Vermont in South Texas called Bitter Creek. Kate's maternal grandfather, King Grayhawk, owned an equally impressive ranch called Kingdom Come in Wyoming, where he served as that state's governor. The two men were lifelong enemies, a fact Harry was sure he could use to his advantage.

The mind boggled at what the tabloids might pay for such juicy gossip.

In the end, Harry had decided that the man who stood to gain the most—the knowledge that he had eight-year-old twin sons—was the man who'd be willing to pay the most. So even before he told Governor Pendleton what he knew, or approached either of Kate's influential grandfathers, or phoned the first tabloid magazine, he'd come here to confront Shaw.

Considering the menacing man standing just inside the door, and the even more dangerous one sitting behind the desk, Harry knew he was walking a tightrope over an abyss.

Greed gave him the courage to take the next step.

Harry glanced at the hulking figure by the door, and said, "I want half a million."

The demand was met by silence.

Harry struggled not to fidget while he waited for Shaw to speak. He'd thought long and hard about how much he could ask Shaw to pay. He'd dreamed of a million, but realized if he got half of that, with what he'd already saved, he could buy a small fishing boat and a condo on the gulf near Corpus Christi and be set for the rest of his life. With a net worth over half a billion, half a million was a drop in the bucket for Shaw.

"I'm sure whatever it is you think you know isn't worth that kind of money," Shaw replied at last.

"This information has nothing to do with your... uh... business activities." Harry had nearly said illegal business activities. The U.S. Justice Department had been unable to prove Shaw had ill-gotten gains under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act, although they'd taken him to court at least once to try. And the Houston cops hadn't yet found enough evidence—despite the woman found strangled in Shaw's bed six weeks ago—to charge him with murder.

Wyatt Shaw seemed to walk between raindrops.

But Harry knew the rich man's life hadn't always been so blessed.

His mother had been Dante D'Amato's mistress until her death, under suspicious circumstances, when Shaw was twelve. The child born on the wrong side of the blanket, so to speak, had succeeded so spectacularly that the government—read FBI—refused to believe he'd done it without help from the mob.

Harry was pretty sure the Feds monitored every dollar in and out of Shaw's many business activities, looking for enough evidence to bring down his empire. Which only convinced Harry that Shaw would know how to pay him the half mil without raising any red flags for the IRS.

"Has to be a woman," Shaw said in disgust. "What is she claiming?"

Harry had expected the dismissive look on Shaw's face. The man had never been married and didn't have a steady girlfriend, though there was no shortage of women in his life. Harry had discovered from a lady lawyer Shaw briefly dated that he always took precautions to ensure there was no unwanted child.

Which made Harry wonder if the dead woman found in Shaw's penthouse suite might have been pregnant. And trying to extort money from Shaw. As he was.

Harry shuddered. The medical examiner's report on the murder victim hadn't been released to the public yet, and Harry's usual connection in the M.E.'s office had been too spooked to leak it to him.

Which meant anything was possible.

Harry's investigation also revealed that Shaw usually bedded his dates in his—now infamous—penthouse at the Shaw Tower, or an equivalent locale. Not one of them had been to his personal retreat, a ranch compound north of...

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