

THE BEAR AND THE BULL

SAMPLE CHAPTER

THE BULLFIGHT

The festive crowd began arriving by mid-morning of a cloudless day at Rancho Ortega's large arena, serving as the *plaza de toros*. Every rainbow color was represented by the elegant ladies' and their *señors'* attire. The rich patrons sat in the shade; the poor patrons sat in the open under the warming sun, inching its way toward high noon.

Luis Montiel had awakened early, lit a candle at the chapel, and prayed. He put on his shimmering rose-colored suit, highlighted by gold sequins on the silk. The pants fit tight against his hard, slender legs and the short vest cinched against his raw-boned upper body. "A fine suit of lights." He smiled, looking in the mirror.

The late-afternoon sun beat down on the vociferous spectators waiting for Luis's ceremonious entrance. The trumpet played the *Paso doble* when the gate opened. Luis entered the arena with his crimson and yellow dress cape thrown over his left shoulder and tightly wrapped around his waist. His left hand lay across his breast while his right hand swung free.

While Luis circled the arena, the crowd broke into applause and threw flowers and wineskins into the ring.

Behind Luis paraded two *banderilleros*; behind them rode two *picadores* on horseback. They were dressed in black and silver embroidered suits.

Luis stopped before Señor Ortega and the other dignitaries and saluted them by pressing his *montera* down with his hand before walking behind the protective barrier.

The crowd quieted for a moment, waited for the first *tercio*. The bull's gate opened and a large, black bull trotted into the ring. Luis stepped out and made a series of passes. The bull attacked the movements with the savage force expected of a Spanish bull. Luis retreated behind the barrier again.

Then the *picadores* reentered the ring on horseback and jabbed their long pike poles into the junction of the bull's neck and shoulder blades.

Luis looked at the bull then walked to the ring's center. His face stern, eyes focused, he performed more dramatic passes with his cape.

Then the *banderilleros* placed two barbed-iron tipped wooden staves decorated with brightly colored paper into the thick hump of the bull's withers. The bull broke away, turned, and drove its horns into one of the *banderilleros*.

Luis watched the man drop. "*Ehe, toro!*" He snapped his cape, creating a cracking sound.

The bull whirled and slid to a stop in the soft sand. Luis waved the cape. The bull, flanks wet with blood, saliva running from his mouth, pawed the ground and straightened his tail. The *matador* taunted the great bull. The bull stood still, panting and watching the *torero*.

The spectators jeered, booed. “*Mala! Mala!* Where is the killer bull?”

Luis dropped on his knees, faced the bull. “*Ehe, toro! Ehe, toro!*” He flaunted the cape back and forth.

The bull pawed the ground harder now. His large nostrils sprayed sand each time he snorted. Luis stood, passed the cape across and behind his body. The bull broke for the movement; its weapons, white horns of death, poised for the attack on the man tormenting him.

Luis arched his back, formed the classical body carriage, and planted his feet for the bull’s charge. Luis led the charging beast inches from his body with balletic passes of the cape to his left and twirling *Veronicas*. Bumped by the bull but not gored, Luis’s suit was stained with the bull’s blood.

Luis recovered from the bump quickly, maneuvering the cape behind his back with both hands. The bull charged again. This time, Luis moved the cape to the left in a perfect *Gaonera*. His planted feet did not move an inch. The bull flew past him, horns made harmless by the flowing cape.

The crowd clapped. “*Olé! Olé!*” Men waved hats.

Every time Luis set up, the bull charged more forcefully. Sometimes straight on, sometimes hooking and swerving, alternating left and right horns, each time just grazing Luis’s stomach.

The crowd cheered the closer the bull came to goring the *matador*. Covered with sweat and dirt, the bull thundered at his adversary who passed the cape so effortlessly. Once, the bull hooked Luis’s right sleeve causing a large gash on his arm. Blood poured from the wound to the sand. Spectators moaned at the sight. Luis dropped his right arm to his side, holding the cape in his other hand. He turned his head for a quick moment but the bull’s horns thrust past him, just missing a leg. The bull whipped around and launched another attack. The *torero* sidestepped and adjusted the cape in his left hand.

Time and again, the majestic bull charged Luis, whose bloody arm became weaker even while his timing and rhythm with the cape dominated the animal.

Now it was time for the *faena* when the *matador* distracted the bull with the *muleta*, a fan-shaped scarlet cloth draped over a short stick, and plunged his sword into the meat between the shoulder blades down into the bull’s heart.

An attendant brought Luis the sword and *muleta*. Luis put the sword in his left hand; his injured right arm was too weak but he managed to hold the *muleta*.

The bull stomped around the ring waiting for more cape movements. Some spectators threw flowers into the arena and roared for the final fight. The bull turned toward Luis, who stood alone in the ring’s center.

Luis dedicated the bull to the officials then made several strained passes while the bull’s huge horns just brushed his upper thighs and stomach. Luis set his jaw. His eyes, serious, hard, he gripped the sword handle tight and cocked his left hand back by his chin. He stared into the bull’s eyes and drew the bull’s head down with a flicker of the *muleta*.

The stands fell quiet.

Luis shifted his eyes for a split second. One of the bull’s horns ripped into the back of Luis’s knee, came out the front, and twisted his foot so it pointed backward. Luis hit the ground hard. Only a single tendon connected his thigh to his calf. The bull’s massive head bore down on Luis with its horns twisting right and left.

Attendants jabbed lances at the bull, chased him away from Luis's body. The *matador* rolled side to side in the blood-covered sand.

Other attendants rushed to Luis with a stretcher, ripped off his shirt, and wrapped it around the almost-severed leg. "You are bleeding so much. Lie still, please."

Luis continued to writhe in pain. But as they carted him from the arena, he managed to raise his left arm in a salute.

The crowd roared. "*Olé! Olé!*"