

CHAPTER ONE

Juarez, Mexico

“Mary, Mother of God, but you are a beautiful whore.” El Capitán’s words were slurred by dark ale and Tommy Jo Sanchez fought to sustain her smile. Fought to control her hot temper, and to hide the revulsion inside her.

Running her fingers along the Capitán’s uniformed arm, she surprised herself as she parted her lips for his kiss. Her mind fought to block the stench of the man’s rotting teeth and green tongue, holding fast to the vision of the black stallion waiting outside. The stallion she needed in order to escape the bordello, disease, and an early death.

As TJ unbuttoned El Capitán’s jacket, the soldier ground his pelvis into her, his erection hard against her belly, his rank body odor filling the room. She prayed the soldier wouldn’t detect the knife hidden in the secret pocket of her pantaloons, her only concession toward self-preservation.

He grabbed at her breasts with calloused hands, and she twisted away as if playing a child’s game. Fighting the bile rising in her throat, she slowly unbuttoned the top of her dress, then watched it fall to the floor. She held her breath, and heard him groan at the sight of her.

El Capitán upended the bottle of mescal, and drank greedily, laughing as he forced the potent drink into her mouth and throat, spilling it over her chin. He bent to kiss her breast, then bit down viciously when his lips touched her tender skin.

Ducking her head, to hide the pain and anger she knew was on her face, she pushed away and jumped aside, forcing herself to shimmy from her skirt. This man was a dirty pig beneath the handsome uniform. A slovenly man not fit for any decent woman. She would have loved nothing more than to serve his cajones on a silver platter, and she would have—except for that beautiful horse.

“Put a! Stop jumping here and there, you crazy whore. I am in a hurry,” He began stroking himself, still concealed by his trousers, then lunged for her, falling forward as he stumbled over his feet. “On the bed now, whore!”

“Soon enough,” TJ tried to grin, lip corners trembling slightly with a promise of crumbling completely. Angry she’d been born into this filth and despair, her only hope now was that this soldier would pass out, making her theft easier. *Pass out, you fool*, she willed. But she wasn’t much good at willing anything, and he continued to grab for her.

His eyes grew wide when she suddenly smiled up at him, and he threw his boots toward the door. He stepped forward confidently, letting out a startled growl when TJ slid past him like a phantom. Angrily, he lashed out with unexpected speed.

“Now!” he screamed, grabbing a handful of her red hair, sending her sprawling across the narrow bed.

TJ needed him naked—naked, drunk, and vulnerable. Not angry. But now he was on top of her, and the terrible grunts she heard were coming from her as she struggled to remain in control. *Do not panic*, she warned herself.

He was much stronger than his fat body suggested, and was now, very frustrated. He slammed his fist into her jaw, sending her head back against the mattress. The soft candlelight broke into a dozen jagged shards that slid into her brain. A foggy veil of defeat closed around her as she felt him ripping at her pantaloons. Her knife!

“Stop. Please, El Capitán. We have time,” she groaned, her ears ringing as she fought against El Capitán’s strength, refusing defeat. She would rather die, here, in this hovel in Juarez, gutted like vermin and feeding the worms. Squirming against him, she managed to wedge her knees between his as she stretched for her knife.

“Shut up!” Spittle flew from his mouth as he slapped her face, time after time. She tasted copper heat running over her tongue and down her throat, and then, focused her

fury.

Gripping the small knife tightly in her hand, she lashed out with the finely honed blade, striking at him, over and over. Any piece of him would do. She hacked, slicing through wet flesh. His shrieks filled the room, and she wished him silenced, wished all like him dead. Her fury rose, as he clawed at the bed's edge, pulling up the sheets, his hoarse cries now mixed with sobs.

El Capitán staggered back from her, falling against the dirt wall. Breath gurgling, he looked dumbly at his nakedness, then to the breeches around his knees. His expression seemed stunned, comical, except for the blood flowing from his side.

TJ hoped she had killed him, this Capitán, this leader of her country.

Panicking, she knew she had to run, and *now, or face execution at the city wall!* No woman, no whore, could act out such vengeance against a soldier of her country and live.

She made for Capitán's boots, grabbing them as she ran, then snatching up the canteen and saddlebag she had filled with supplies the night before.

El Capitán sputtered, vomiting onto the floor as she passed.

On her way out the door, her veins surging with adrenalin and fear, she began laughing hysterically. Crossing the porch, she tossed El Capitán's softly polished boots into a slimy water trough. Swinging onto the beautiful stallion, TJ slapped the saddlebag in front of her, and hooked the canteen over the saddle horn. She howled in fiendish delight at the sight of El Capitán's bloody nakedness slouched in the doorway, made brilliant by the moonlight.

Life was a game, and she was driven to escape and win, or die trying. She was determined her life would be more. When TJ was ten and she'd been hungry, she'd watched the laborers gamble in alleyways. They had coins. A few were won. A few were lost. She learned what it took to win. Observed the men's faces because the cards were

not everything. Taught herself well enough until, as a rouse, they'd finally let her play. When she'd learned their game better than them, they'd run her off. Finally, at twelve, she'd dressed up in a friends dress and was allowed to try her hand at poker in one of the cantinas. She was good, which only made her fiery attitude worse.

“Putá!” El Capitán gasped weakly reaching for her, pulling her back to the present.

“Adiós, bastardo.” TJ saluted, holding tight, as the stallion reared. This wonderful horse was hers. “TJ Sanchez is no whore!”



By mid-morning Tommy Jo had named the stallion Raven. She slowed their pace with the intention of finding shade, resting, and watering Raven. She also needed to put her dress on. Her escape from El Capitán had been frantic. There had been no time to dress and the night air had cleansed her soul. She had disregarded her need to clothe herself. The sun would soon blister her shoulders and thighs. A lesson she did not care to relearn.

Pounding hooves caused her to look back. What she saw was ten times worse than El Capitán. Apache! Fear wound its cold fingers around her heart. Adrenalin surged into her veins and she drove the stallion faster. Freedom was what she sought. She would not give up easily!

“Haw! Haw!” She put her heels into Raven. The stallion leapt forward.

Two braves descended a rocky slope, dropping in close behind her, waving lances and laughing. The enemy was close, white-painted faces and chests streaked in red, matching the war paint on their ponies. If only she had a real gun instead of the tiny derringer she'd so carefully slipped into the pocket of her skirt. A skirt now tucked

securely inside the saddlebag. Foolishness can kill.

TJ rode hard through the flat lands, dodging mesquite, bramble, and rock. The stallion had heart, though she had no idea how long he could keep up this demanding pace. If the savages caught her, they would kill her, or worse. They were having a good time of this, shouting, and stabbing their wicked lances into the air. Death was on her heels.

Her head cleared; her thoughts focused. Her world filled with the sound of pounding hooves and screaming Apache, her heart beating in her ears.

Blazing through a narrow ravine, into a small valley, she found a trap instead of safety. She circled the stallion round and round. Rock-lined walls jutted straight up on all sides. Her escape might as well have turned into a coffin. “Nooo,” she screamed, spinning the stallion in a tight knot, not wanting to give up. Her eyes searched desperately for an exit she knew wasn’t there. “Back, boy,” she told the horse and touched him on his head. Backing Raven into the western-most shadows, TJ began digging in her saddlebag for her skirt and gun. Her knife, when last seen, had still been stuck in the infamous El Capitán.

The stallion blew, pawing the ground, sensing the threat of death. Raven did not quiver, nor back from the advancing guttural yells and blowing horses. Bravely, he stood to face their enemy; together, they waited.