

Chapter 9

The blackness swallowed her. She extended her hands to find the cave wall.

The air became cool and damp on her skin. Taste of fear in her mouth.

Why did she agree to this? They could slit her throat and no one would ever find her.

The cave narrowed into a claustrophobic passageway. They had only walked about ten yards.

Were those statues? No-rigid Villistas glared at her on both sides of the sweating walls. She smelled the grease on their bandoliers and pistols as she brushed by them

Everyone was very close. Faint glow of a lamp from somewhere. Faces of the revolution.

One of them was a woman with a long black skirt and a high-necked white shirt that tapered tight around her narrow waist. A holstered pistol hung midway across her torso and two belts of cartridges made a wavy "X" across her chest. A sombrero covered her thick black hair.

The woman came toward her and mumbled something that Callie could not understand.

Callie backed away nervously. "No comprendo."

"She must check you for weapons, señorita." A distinguished looking man with a mustache and cultured voice spoke from behind the young woman. "She is a *soldadera*, one of many who fight with their men, para la revolución."

Callie stood still while she was searched, ill at ease with the hot glare of the bandits' eyes upon her in the cramped space. Strong odors of sweat and kerosene oil hung in the close air.

She held her hand out to the woman. "Mi nombre es Callie. ¿Cómo te llamas? "

The woman was surprised that Callie wanted to know her name and looked back at the man who had spoken. He nodded his approval.

"Mi nombre es Elena, señorita," she answered faintly.

Callie smiled and shook her hand. "Con mucho gusto, Elena. Es un nombre muy bonito."

The young woman, hardly out of her teens, smiled with embarrassment. "Gracias," she said, barely audible, backing away into the darkness.

"Miss Masterson. I am Ramon Fernandez. We are pleased that you come. General Villa would like to...how you Americans say it...set the record straight. Please, this way."

He ushered her into a small dead-end passageway, where more soldiers stood on either side of a cot upon which General Pancho Villa lay. He wore a dirty shapeless sweater and was sitting up against a wall. His right leg was stretched out, wrapped in bloody bandages and immobilized by a primitive wooden splint.

A lantern sat on a ledge and filled the space with pale yellow light. A small candle flickered in a niche in the wall. Villa puffed on a thin cigar. A bottle of liquor sat on a small table beside the cot. She was offered a chair, so she sat down. Now smells of melting wax and cigar smoke mingled with the sweat and kerosene.

The lack of any conversation made Callie nervous, and then Villa spoke. "Buenas días, señorita. My English...it's not so good, pero General Fernández, he help us."

Now Callie was close enough to get a good look at the infamous Villa. He had a large head and thick neck, but a baby face, a little pudgy. His mustache made a long flat triangle under his nose, and he had short black, wiry hair, with a high forehead. In spite of the coolness, beads of sweat glistened on his face.

The prominent brown eyes held all his secrets. They were restless and seemed to speak to Callie before he had uttered a word. He was pale and looked fatigued from the ordeal of his serious leg wound, but the fire in his eyes spoke volumes about his inner strength, and cruelty.

He made her feel uneasy, as he puffed on the cigar.

"What do they think of me en los Estados Unidos? They think Villa, he's alive or dead?"

Callie chose her words with care. "It is most people's opinion that you are still alive. I must say, General, that before the attack on Columbus you were considered a hero, a Robin Hood-you know of him?"

Ramon explained.

"Sí, claro, the English bandido. We are much alike," he said, smiling broadly.

"But, because of the attack, and the Americans who died, they are angry with you, which, of course, is only natural."

"I tell you. In Columbus... my hombres, they get a little loco. But that man, Sam Ravel, he sold no good stuff...bad bullets, couldn't shoot."

"Sam Ravel? I stayed at his hotel. I met his son Arthur. Your men nearly killed him, but he ran off. He was only sixteen." Callie had anger in her voice, in spite of her vulnerable situation.

Villa turned to Ramon for clarification.

"El hijo de Sam tenía dieciséis años."

"It was not me that said to kill the son. But our time is un poco... I must speak of other things. I hear you are una mujer valiente, una mujer de honor...how you say?"

"Yo comprendo. A brave woman and a woman of honor. That's very kind of you, General."

Villa seemed pleased with himself and enjoyed his cigar for a few moments.

"Así, what I want to say to you, to los Estados Unidos, is this: We fight for the people, la gente, we don't fight for us. You understand,sí? I am just a campesino. No, I am all of them. I become a bandido when I was young- my jefe my boss, he rape my sister. My father, he was dead, mi madre she work for us kids...we had nothing, señorita. Nada. No derechos, no justicia. Comprende?"

"Sí. No rights, no justice." Callie wanted him to hear the words in English.

Then Villa began to rant with emotion and gestured dramatically with his hands, wincing in pain from his swollen leg, too fast for Callie to understand, about Porfirio Diaz, an oppressive dictator during his childhood, and how Carranza, whom President Wilson now backed instead of Villa, would establish another class-based society that would keep the peasants trapped in poverty. He hated the Spanish upper class for enslaving the Mexican people. He had even less use for the Church, which was just as corrupt, he exhorted.

Ramon patiently translated.

The outburst visibly tired him. Callie surmised that he hadn't slept much, with the wound and the constant harassment of Pershing's troops.

"It is too bad for the killed gringos, pero we fight for nuestras vidas! Nuestras vidas, señorita."

"Sí, General. For your lives."

"The land of Mexico...it is rich in minerales... mucho gold, mucho silver... mucho oil. We sell to gringos, the Germans, everybody, but where all that money? ¿Dónde está el dinero? He rubbed his fingers together. "We don't see. Nada. señorita, we are still poor as when bastard conquistadors took our gold. Nada ha cambia. No change. For trecientos anos, nothing changes. They rape my sister. They rape Mexico. Y así, luchamos, we fight, por una vida mejor. It is our right, no? It is a right for everyone. Para toda la gente!"

"A better life. It is your right," Callie said quietly, moved by his eloquence.

Nevertheless, she bit her lip and decided to challenge his words. The lantern illuminated her womanly profile, this young woman with her tumbling black curls and thin, graceful neck, such an unlikely person to be challenging a violent outlaw, who had murdered men, and women, point blank, for daring to disagree.

"Some of the people I have met say they see no difference between what Carranza's army does and what your men do. They live each day with much fear. They suffer. Their animals, their crops, even their sons, are taken from them, their women also raped, and they get little in return. Sometimes, they are shot, in front of their children, if they protest. I myself have seen some of these things." She paused. Her eyes were moist, but her voice remained steady. Don't shake, damn you, don't let them see you shake. "General Sir, where is the justice in fighting, if there is no compassion, compasión por los pobres? If you do not discriminate between the victim and the enemy?"

She waited uneasily for Ramon to translate. As he did, a wave reaction of passed through the soldiers, who

mumbled threateningly, indignant at this gringa's words.

Villa remained calm as he took in her words, but his eyes flashed like silent lightning. "Mexico...she is not like your country," he said, wagging his finger for emphasis. "From when the Spanish conquistadores come, till now, Mexico is soaked in blood. La sangre. It is like...una lengua, a terrible language we are taught, por la fuerza...how you say?"

"By force."

"By force, sí" His voice had weakened to a whisper. "Señorita, it is not what we want, la violencia, but it is what we have."

He slumped with fatigue and waved his hand, as if to say, enough.

"We will not give up, until we kill every one of those bastards, Carranza and his dogs. And then, we are free. Tell them what I say."

He sighed heavily and crushed his cigar out on the damp cave floor, sending a smoky hiss into the air.

Callie got up. Villa raised his hand, as if to hold her there for something he forgot to say.

“Señorita Masterson. What I hear of you...it is true. A brave woman.” He looked at his men. “Mira amigos-una mujer muy, muy bravo. La dejó pasar.” They stepped back to let her pass.