



## ***Awaken My Heart***

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## **Chapter 1**

### ***April, 1803, The Colony of Tejas***

Before the rooster had crowed three times, forbidden adventure had crept into Marianne's mind. In the shadows of her room, she quickly dressed and stole from her father's house to the outside. Cool air bathed her face, and a yellow-orange sunrise streaked the eastern sky. She made her way to the stables and peered inside the dimly lit building for signs of the servants before gathering up her skirts and squeezing through the latched entrance. Safely inside, she eased the heavy door closed and cringed at the creak, fearing its sound would arouse attention.

The smell of horses and leather met her nostrils, their familiarity breeding both comfort and excitement. She stopped and listened for voices. Her heart pounded furiously at the thought of being discovered. Glancing upward, she saw a glimmer of sunlight filter through a high window, illuminating a golden, straw-laden path to Diablo's stall.

Her father's sleek, milky-white stallion pawed at the ground and snorted as though defying any intruder to enter his domain. Weston Phillips, Marianne's father, owned the horse, but not his spirit. Only the stableman could groom him. Only Marianne could ride him.

Marianne gasped and hurried to his stall. "Hush, Diablo. Someone will realize I am here."

At the sound of her voice, the stallion ceased his complaints. She lifted the latch and stepped inside, being careful to gently close the door behind her. She eagerly anticipated the two of them racing across the dew-bathed hills dotted with live oak and juniper. How she yearned for the freedom of flying with the wind and being as one with the powerful Diablo.

She wrapped her arms around the stallion's neck. He neighed softly and nuzzled into her embrace. "Oh, I have missed you, too." She planted a kiss on his forehead. "And we have a long morning to ride."

The low rumble of male voices pricked her ears and paralyzed her. Papa! He and Clay Wharton, the hacienda's foreman, had entered the barn. She held her breath and glanced about the stall. If Papa found her, his wrath would echo across the vast expanse of the Phillips Hacienda.

When the voices of Papa and Clay grew closer, she slipped her hands from Diablo's neck and crouched against the wall next to the stall door. She prayed neither Papa nor Clay heard her heart slamming against her chest.

"Quiet, you devil." Papa stopped outside of Diablo's stall. "I would welcome the opportunity to blow a hole through you, but I need you to breed with my mares."

Clay chuckled. "Are you sure you want more horses with his temperament?"

"I will sell them to the Spaniards," Papa said. "Let them deal with it."

Diablo lifted his head. His notched ears lay back as though he understood Papa's contemptuous words.

Her father banged his fist against the side of the stall. "Remember, I still own you."

Marianne clasped her arms around her trembling body. She envisioned her father's penetrating, blue-gray eyes, framed with the many lines of age and Texas sun. The servants called them relampago, lightning eyes, for they flashed with his ravings and curses.

“Where are our horses?” her father shouted. “Lazy Mexicans. None of them worth their pay.”

“My guess, all of ‘em here are aiding Armando Garcia,” Clay said. “That rebel needs a bullet in his head.”

She’d heard the stories about the man who rallied the peasants to fight against Papa’s demands to leave their valley. The young girls dreamed of him and proclaimed him more handsome than any man ever born. The boys and men sang Armando Garcia’s praises—the hero who dared to defy the harsh treatment of her father.

“You get rid of him, and there’s a bonus for you,” Papa said. “I’m tired of dealing with his arrogance.”

“You know what I want.”

Papa seemed to ignore him.

“I plan to talk to Garcia today. Our cattle need to graze in La Flor. Those Mexicans can move closer to one of the missions along the San Antonio River and leave me their valley.”

“Weston, they haven’t agreed to leave in the past. What makes you think they will now?”

Her father laughed. “I refuse to give them a choice. They’ll either clear out of there, or I’ll force them out. We have more weapons than they could ever hope to steal.”

“What about men to carry it out? The vaqueros will not fight against their own people.”

“I’ve already sent for some friends of mine back in Virginia. Everything is handled.” Her father spat tobacco juice against the side of the stall. The slap of it coupled with his gruff words agitated Diablo.

“Shut up,” Papa said to Diablo’s snorts and tossing of his head. “This isn’t a good day to rile me.” He reached for the stall’s latch.

“Leave the horse alone. Let’s saddle up and get out of here,” Clay said. “The day’s wasting away.”

When the heavy door of the stable finally creaked shut, and the pounding of horse hooves faded into the distance, Marianne struggled to her feet from her crouched position, trembling more from overhearing Papa and Clay’s conversation than the fear of being discovered in Diablo’s stall.

What did Papa plan to do? He had plenty of land without adding more from the villagers' valley. From what she knew about Armando Garcia, he'd not take Papa's threats lightly. She hoped the problem could be settled without a bloody battle, for she feared the Mexican peasants were no match for whatever Papa had in mind.

With a deep sigh, she stepped from the stall to fetch Diablo's silver-studded bridle from the tack room. Beneath a worn, carved leather saddle decorated boldly in orange and yellow mineral paints, she found her cotton skirt and blouse.

One of the servant women had given Marianne the clothes after she complained of having to ride in the cumbersome petticoats. Mama objected to her wearing the apparel of the Mexican women, especially the blouses that revealed her elbows. But Marianne loved the loose fit and the way the style made riding effortless.

Diablo pranced like a child eager to play. She laughed at his impatience and pushed aside the conversation she'd overheard between Papa and Clay. Later she'd ask one of the servants about the valley. She grabbed a sombrero and fitted its cord beneath her chin. Mama would banish her from any horse if the sun tanned her pale skin.

Leading her beloved stallion to the stable door, she pulled hard to slide it open. As a child she'd found the task impossible, but at eighteen-years-old, she'd found the undertaking had become easier.

"Marianne," Mama had said. "You need to abandon riding and settle down. You must learn to act like a woman ready for marriage."

"Not yet," Marianne had replied, planting a kiss on her mother's pale cheek, "but soon."

Neither spoke of her father's threats to arrange a marriage with a Spanish-born cattle baron, Lorenzo Sanchez de la Diaz y Franco, who lived near the Guadalupe River. She knew why Papa wanted the marriage. The Sanchez holdings promised to multiply Papa's power and influence among the Tejas elite.

Marianne detested the thought of marriage after living with the unpleasantness between Mama and Papa. Why put herself under the dominion of any man, especially one who was twice her age? Still, she knew her feelings meant nothing if Papa wanted the marriage. She would be forced to comply with his demands.

Shaking her head to rid herself of all the unpleasant thoughts, she raised her foot into the stirrup and swung her leg over the saddle. She turned her attention to the western pastures and the farther hills where her father's cattle grazed.

The stallion left a blinding cloud of dust behind them, and all around she reveled in the beauty of spring unfolding like the wings of a butterfly. Yellowish-white yarrow and nodding daisies with orange centers scattered the earth.

Yet, in all of this beauty, the Phillips Hacienda could not compare to the lush valley called La Flor. It bordered on the southern edge of Papa's empire and had been fed with underground springs. La Flor's inhabitants were Mexican peasants who had nothing but their valley. They were a mixture of the Spanish and the conquered Indians. Mestizos. A race of their own. A race who had no future except for the hope of their own land. Reports were the valley was green year around. To them it was paradise.

The morning wore on. Marianne and Diablo stopped and basked in the shade beneath the leafed canopy of an oak tree. Another time they rested beside a cool, gurgling stream, and Diablo drank his fill. There, Marianne wove wildflowers for a wreath and placed them around the horse's neck. She loved the strong stallion, impressive with his perfectly aristocratic stance and his independent spirit. She allowed him to pick and choose his way. After all, he came from the Spanish mustang, intelligent and strong-willed. Perhaps the two of them had become friends because each respected the mind of the other.

Seated on a grassy knoll, she watched her stallion toss his head to the south. "What is it, my prince?" She gazed in the same direction, but saw nothing.

They had ridden far, and a twinge of caution settled in the pit of her stomach. Marauding Comanches could be nearby. She stood and stared across the quiet rolling landscape. It appeared peaceful, but at any given moment it could erupt. When the stallion's ears stood erect, she gathered up the reins.

"Señorita, there is no need to make haste," a male voice said in Spanish.

Fear singed her heart, and she whirled around in the stranger's direction. All of Mama's warnings about the ways of men replayed in her mind, and she pulled the brim of her sombrero farther down over her face. From under a grove of trees, the man rode a dun gelding toward her. The quality of the horse startled her, uncommon for a man of threadbare dress. Few of her father's vaqueros owned so fine an animal.

“I must have frightened you. I’m sorry.”

Gripping the reins and holding back Diablo, she realized he must not see her light skin.

“Your stallion protects you. That is good.”

Marianne nodded and moved to mount Diablo. The man inched his dun closer, and the stallion screamed his protest. Though Marianne understood his Spanish, during Juan's lessons, he'd made her promise to not to tell anyone as it could put them both in danger.

“Shall I not see your face, Señorita?” His voice rang like a soft breeze in mid summer, but Mama had warned her of falling prey to a man’s charm. Marianne climbed onto the saddle. No man would assault her with Diablo as her guardian.

Holding back the reins, she stole a curious look at the man. He pushed his sombrero back from his head, revealing raven-black hair and a honey-colored face so handsome that it took her breath away. His genteel features best befit the Spanish noblemen who often visited her home. Deep, penetrating brown eyes, veiled in thick black lashes, stared back at her. And a slight cleft in his chin gave him a Spanish appeal. This was not a Mexican, a Mestizo, a mixture of the Spanish and Indian. Or was he?

The stranger peered back, but not a line on his face revealed any emotion. “You have pale skin. Who are you? Tell me your name.”

Marianne swallowed hard. The words she’d heard that described La Flor’s rebel leader, Armando Garcia, fit this man. Surely he could not be her father’s enemy? Mama had often said sin took the disguise of beauty. Paralyzed with the thought of danger, she couldn’t force her feet to sink into Diablo’s sides.

The man drew near, and Diablo lifted his front legs. The action propelled Marianne to her senses, and she urged her stallion into a full gallop and raced toward the hacienda.

She did not attempt to pull him back but sunk her heels into his flanks until the two were one with the wind. Who was the man who had momentarily captured her senses? The memory both frightened and thrilled her. The mixed emotions were foreign, and she didn’t know whether to shove them aside or allow them to linger.

By the time Marianne and Diablo returned home in the noonday sun, Diablo heaved from the vigorous pace, and sweat glistened from his white coat. She’d thought of nothing else but the handsome stranger by the stream. Was she a fool? He could have meant her harm.

While she walked Diablo to cool him down, one of the servant boys hurried across the stable yard. "Hard run, Señorita?"

"Diablo sensed something amiss. He wasted no time in getting us back here."

"Señora Phillips, she call for you." The young boy kept his distance from Diablo.

Instantly, concern for her mother's delicate condition alarmed her. "Is she ill?"

"I think not." His dark eyes peered up at her. "But I think you might want to hurry."

"Yes, of course." She quickly led Diablo to the stables and his stall. As soon as she spoke to her mother, she'd return to tend to her stallion.

Marianne's feet barely touched the stone entryway shaded with huge palms that led to the carved wooden doors of the adobe home. Pushing it open, she rushed past the reception room and its huge logged ceiling, down a hallway, and back to her mother's bedroom. Marianne stopped for an instant outside the bedroom door and prepared for the worst.

Mama lay asleep against propped pillows. Her eyelids fluttered over cavernous pits that had once been a clear azure blue, but now were dull and lifeless with the prolonged effects of her illness.

"There you are." Mama opened her eyes and gave a faint smile. "I don't have to guess where you've been, for the telltale scent of horse is wrapped around you. Is this my daughter dressed like a servant girl?"

Marianne glanced down at the blue skirt and white blouse. Her cheeks flushed warm.

"For a moment, I thought one of Carmita's daughters graced my room." She beckoned Marianne to come closer. "I envy your free spirit. I wish it could last forever."

"Yes, Mama, I do too. When you are better, we will ride together again." She tilted her head. "I might even use a side saddle."

"You are my best medicine. We must talk of many things, Marianne. Your father will be gone for a few days, and he has asked me to prepare you."

"Prepare me for what?" Immediately her thoughts flew to LaFlor, but her mother would not have knowledge of such things. Papa kept his affairs to himself and Clay.

Her mother brushed back a lock of light brown hair. Not a single strand of silver wove through her tresses, and her features still bore the smoothness of youth. If only the spirit of

good health surrounded her again. “He plans to visit Don Lorenzo Sanchez . . .to arrange your marriage.”

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