

# Chapter One

**Tuesday June 24, 1884**

The jagged rocks of the ridgeline pushed skyward like the blades of a thousand knives. The rough edges could easily slice through the airship's canvas as it danced on the aerial rapids. Only the foolhardy would attempt to pass over these peaks in such a manner. But duty for one's country and a promise of cash could change the mind of any airship pilot.

Through the brass spyglass, a woman studied the valley ahead. Her keen eye caught the glimmer of something and her body quivered with excitement. For Jasmine Hawke, the thrill of the chase never grew old. "I see the tracks."

"There is the locomotive's plume!" Thyme, her younger sister, also studied the terrain ahead through her own lenses. Any chance to fly thrilled Thyme but she dreaded what lay ahead.

Near the base of the ridgeline, a trail of billowing black smoke came into view. The speeding locomotive spewed out a torrent of fire and ash which rose and gently fell behind it, leaving a dark stain across the sky.

Painted in reds and greens, the train raced along the thin strips of gleaming metal that stretched from behind and curved off into the distance. Its furnace burnt hotter than usual and pushed the train well over fifty-five miles an hour. Whoever manned the controls taxed the engine to the limit in a desperate, albeit pointless attempt to escape.

Thyme leaned closer and tapped the pilot's shoulder, ignoring the smell of his sweat. "Straight ahead! I think we catch up to it."

The Mustang class airships were the fastest that existed in this part of the world. Only the Russians had a faster airship, or so they claimed. The thirty foot long green canvas tube held the lighter-than-air gasses. A series of thick ropes held a metal-framed gondola with just enough room for a pilot and a couple of passengers or a pile of mail bags. A coal-powered steam turbine drove the two massive propellers that jutted out of the tiny vessel on each side. This particular ship bore the name *Sophie* as well as the insignia of the Pony Express. The company

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owned and operated all the airships of this type since their speed made for the fastest possible delivery of mail in the world. They promised a trip from the East coast to West in six days and never failed. But just as important as their postal duties, the company had a special arrangement with the U.S. government: the speedy transport of special persons. For the Hawke girls, travel on the Mustangs seemed common place.

Within the cockpit, the pilot, a scarecrow of a man named Spencer, watched the train and adjusted his heading for the best approach. He tried pushing the throttle lever forward a little more, but the craft was already at maximum speed. Diving down from the ridge-top might generate some extra speed but he knew it wouldn't be enough to catch up.

"Ain't gonna make it," Spencer said in a thick Cajun accent. "I got dis girl at full speed and we be driftin' behind 'em. Shoo-wee, they be a-bookin'. Must be close ta fifty or sixty miles an hour."

Jasmine leaned in close and shouted over the noise of the propellers. "Up ahead, the tracks curve to the right and head west. Cut across the valley and we'll meet up with it on the other side of the turn."

Wind whipped the loose locks of red hair across her pale face. Jasmine stepped to the open hatch and looked down at the passing ground. She welcomed the rushing wind as a relief from the heat of the American Southwest which she and Thyme had endured for the past several days. Removing a jeweled clasp from her hair, she let it dance in the wind for a moment before restraining it again. She wiggled her head to insure the locks would stay in place this time. Any distraction while she worked could be fatal.

Jasmine loved this part of her job. Her heart raced, blood flowed and she felt alive. The seventeen-year-old Thyme, whose long black hair, dusky skin and Indian features were a polar opposite of Jasmine's Irish heritage wasn't as keen on the idea of leaping onto the roof of a speeding train. Thyme's fingers tapped nervously on the grip of her holstered pistol and she fought to keep the fear from showing in her eyes.

*Sophie* charged at top speed across the open terrain towards the spot where the tracks curved. Jasmine's guess seemed to be right on the money. The train fell behind in the curve as they approached the other side of the valley. With luck, they'd reach the tracks just ahead of the speeding locomotive.

The women pulled their pistols and double-checked them. Jasmine dropped the gun back into its leather holster and snapped the strap in

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place, and then, out of habit tapped a finger on each of the daggers and throwing knives she had hidden on her form. In a perky voice, she said, “Don’t worry, Ty. It’ll be fun.”

Thyme holstered the weapon and adjusted her belt. She tugged at the fabric of her long brown and beige dress and grumbled. She hated having to dress up when in the field, and she especially despised the tight corset that seemed determined to keep the air from her lungs. She never understood why women in polite society dressed in a manner that some old world societies used as forms of torture.

“Don’t you think jumping on to a moving train in a dress is a little dangerous? Pants are better suited for this line of work or at least; something shorter like a nice skirt.”

Jasmine rolled her eyes. “Are you suggesting that pants would make the jump safer somehow? Now make sure that your gear is tight. Last thing you want is for your gun or a knife to bounce out when we land.” She then held tight to the hand railings over the door and leaned out for a better look. They’d crossed the valley and the train now closed in from behind. She tilted her head toward the tracks below and yelled to the pilot. “Spencer, move us over the tracks and keep us straight. Maybe drop another ten feet or so. We’ll jump out on the first or second car.”

With little grace, the airship slid in to position over the tracks. Less than a minute later, the locomotive caught up and passed under them. Spencer pushed forward on the control wheel and lowered the craft down only to have the cockpit engulfed in the smoke that belched out of the locomotive. Jasmine strained her eyes until the roof of a car came into view. She grabbed the younger woman and leapt out in to the inky void.

Jasmine hit the car hard. Her body bounced to the side, but she immediately threw herself flat against the roof to keep from rolling off. At this speed, a couple of bounces and a fall from the train would be fatal. Her legs ached from the impact but she bit her lip and suffered through it. As agent of the United States Government, she couldn’t afford to let a little something like pain and suffering stop her. Glancing around, she saw Thyme in a similar pose behind her. Jasmine had hoped to land on the second car, but the smoke had blocked her view. They found themselves three cars back from the engine and tender.

*Good girl*, Jasmine thought. Years of training had paid off. Thyme’s contributions to the mission during the past week had been invaluable. She could not have located the missing train and its cargo of weapons without her.

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Both rose to their feet and ran haphazardly toward the locomotive. The chugging noise of the engine hurt their ears and every push of the pistons could be felt in their chest. The occasional black puffs of smoke that didn't rise high enough obscured their vision and stung their noses. Both tried to hold their breath to avoid having the burning fumes enter their lungs and send them into a coughing fit.

They ran and leapt over the gaps between the train cars. Jasmine wondered where the men who'd stolen the train were hiding.

*Shouldn't the rogues be around to put up a fight? Surely they heard the impact on the roof or spotted the airship overhead,* she thought.

The ladies jumped down into the tender behind the engine and hit the loose chunks of coal, sending up a cloud of granular dust. Jasmine managed to remain upright but her sister fell when the rocks shifted beneath her feet. She dropped hard into the sharp-edge rocks. Thyme cursed through her coughs but rose to her feet with haste.

Through the open back of the locomotive's cab, Jasmine saw a shirtless man of impressive size and build at the controls. A thick layer of scars crossed his dusky face and neck, severe enough to be visible at a distance. He'd seen the airship and kept looking back over his shoulder. His eyes widened upon spotting the approaching women and he reached for something.

A double-barreled shotgun appeared in his hands with Jasmine just twelve feet away. She leapt forward, watching for a sign. His face tensed as he pulled the trigger. She threw herself to the right as one barrel fired. Her sister dove to the left.

Jasmine hit the piled coal, but the spot sloped down. She landed and quickly slid to the edge of the car. She bounced and started to roll over the side of the tender; however her leg slipped into a crevasse between the car's wall and the coal. With much effort, she tensed up her muscles and kept her leg from straightening out so that it acted as a hook, keeping her from dropping to a certain death. She dangled upside down and tried to take stock of the situation. Her body slammed against the side of the car repeatedly as the train rocketed forward. Her sister's shouts could just be heard over the rumbling. She shouted but knew Thyme wouldn't hear. So Jasmine extended her free leg straight up and shook her foot as if to say that all was fine.

As Jasmine grabbed at the side of the car, the man leaned out of the locomotive. He ducked back in as a series of gunshots rang out. Jasmine could hear the reports of Thyme's pistol and the bullets' impacts on the metal cab. She hoped that he'd been hit but grunted in

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anger when he stood up after Thyme's sixth and last bullet failed to connect.

The man leaned from the side door again and looked back at his helpless prey. The shotgun swung in her direction. A well-placed shot could blast her clean off the side of the tender and leave her on the rails and timbers below. She aimed her pistol, despite the bouncing, and fired two shots in rapid succession. The bullets failed to find their target but the man jerked back into the cab, accidentally firing his remaining shell in the process.

"You missed!" Thyme shouted as she reached down and grabbed for Jasmine's free hand. "You never miss!"

Jasmine reached up and yelled, "I'm hanging...off the side...of a train!"

"Yes, but you never miss," Thyme quipped as she hauled her sister to safety.

"Lovie, I was hanging off the side of a train! That can be a little distracting. What was your excuse?" She said as Thyme reloaded her Colt .45 with practiced efficiency. "Right then, are you ready?"

Both jumped and advanced with pistols at the ready. Thyme managed a couple of steps before losing her footing and falling hard into the coal again. A jagged shard sliced her right hand open, and she dropped her pistol. She immediately jumped to retrieve it, but the weapon bounced and tumbled over the side. Again, she cursed her luck.

Jasmine took the lead in the renewed charge, jumping into the open cab of the locomotive. Her pistol came up as soon as her feet hit the metal floor. The man's eyes widened with a mix of panic and anger as a well-placed kick knocked the shotgun from his hands before fresh shells could be loaded. The man grabbed a coal shovel. It moved in a blur and smacked her hand hard. The Colt flew across the cab. It bounced end over end and fell out the open side door.

"Alright then." She shook the pain from her injured hand while the other dropped to the dagger on her belt. "We do this the hard way."

Jasmine ducked as the shovel swung back around. It missed her head by inches. She darted to the side and thrust out with the blade. Its point missed as he jerked back. The maneuver put her in an awkward position and the man took advantage of it. Grabbing her wrist, he shoved her into a corner of the cab. The sharp edge of the shovel moved up to her throat and pressed against her skin while he held the other hand with the blade uncomfortably against the metal wall. She inhaled sharply out of reflex but ended up coughing. Even the winds tearing through the cab couldn't draw the stench away from of the man.

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He spoke with a thick Mexican accent. Dark eyes, full of fury and hunger, studied their prey. "Don't be losin' your head, senorita. Like it when dey gots a little fight in d'em." His lips turned up at the corners in a sinister smile. She could see in his expression that he wanted something more before finishing her off.

The sound of feet hitting the floor made both turn. With lightning reflexes, Thyme grabbed a steel poker from its rack and swung. The iron rod smacked the man in the face with a thud that could be heard over the engine. The blow knocked him backwards. She swung again, connecting with man's head in a loud cracking noise. Tripping over one of the levers, he stumbled back, waving his arms about in a desperate attempt to steady himself. Jasmine kicked the man hard in the gut, pushing him through the side doorway.

"I think I had the brute handled," Jasmine said as she rubbed the red mark on her throat where the shovel had rested.

"I know you did."

Jasmine looked at the unfamiliar controls of the engine. "Do you know...?"

The younger girl rolled her eyes. She tugged the throttle levers back and locked them in place, then applied the brakes. With a squeal, the train slowed. As it did so, Thyme looked down and pulled at her dress. It had torn in several places and black patches of coal dust stained the fabric. It was beyond cleaning or mending.

"Every time!" She complained and pulled the material out for Jasmine to see.

"Honestly Ty," Jasmine smirked, "This is why mother liked me more. I didn't go around ruining all of my good clothes."

With the train stopped, the pair approached the last of its boxcars. The others cars had been searched with disappointing results and the rush of excitement had dissipated and left in its wake a sense of failure.

"I can't believe you missed."

"Let it go, lovie. It seems you had six shots and couldn't connect either." Jasmine noted that the lock was missing on this car too and slid the side door open.

"Yes, but I'm not the crack shot you claim to be. Besides, he had cover." Thyme looked into the car.

"This isn't going to be pleasant." Jasmine's words echoed through the emptiness.

"Every one of them! Empty. All the rifles and munitions. All gone and not one single lead. Nothing to give us an idea of what is going on."

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Jasmine looked down the tracks, “There may be someone back this way that is if he survived the fall. Besides, I dropped my gun and need to fetch it.” Thyme sighed and followed behind as they began to walk.

With the sun dropping in the western sky, the women quickened their pace. A few minutes later, they saw the crumpled form of a man lying beside the tracks. The injured Mexican man bled from more wounds than either woman cared to count. Bones were broken and some jutted from his body in a grotesque fashion. His face and form were pale from the light covering of dust which made him look like a month-old corpse.

Jasmine sat beside him and cradled his head in her hands. She pulled a kerchief from her pocket and wiped his face clean of dust and sweat. His eyes flickered open and showed the pain that coursed through him.

“Please, do the right thing and tell me where the weapons are.” She said in a soft voice. “No reason to take secrets to the grave. There are lives at stake. Do you want that blood on your hands when you meet Saint Peter?”

He looked up at her, taken aback by her gentleness especially after he’d tried to kill her. A long groan escaped his lips and finally he whispered, “They’re with *Zeus* now.”

When his eyes shut for the final time, she slowly lowered his head. Jasmine looked to her sister who stood quiet for a change. Thyme bit her lip and nodded, acknowledging the man’s passing from one world to another. The girl’s first encounter with death didn’t appear to affect Thyme at all.

Jasmine felt no grief for the loss of this man’s life, but she did take care in closing his eyelids for a final time.

“Come on,” Jasmine said as she stood. “Help me find my gun. When Spencer gets here, we’ll load him on board. No need to leave him out here to be a meal for the buzzards.”

In the distance, *Sophie* inched across the sky toward them. It slowed and dropped lower as it prepared to land on the dusty landscape. The propeller blades throttled back but they still kicked up a cloud of dust behind it.

“So, he said they were with *Zeus*. Who is that? We were sent to find a trainload of weapons heading to Fort Bliss, spent a week looking and come up with nothing. Is anything ever simple in the field?”

“I don’t know who *Zeus* is,” Jasmine looked to her sister and nodded, “and no, nothing is ever simple. But where would the fun be if all the answers were right out in the open.”

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“So,” Thyme huffed, “You’re the great detective, so what do we do now?”

“We head back to Fort Bliss and check in with the Major. Maybe he’ll have some news for us. I think I can sweet talk Spencer into flying us there.”

“The sun is going down and we’re about four hours away from Bliss or El Paso.” Thyme said in a sharp tone.

Jasmine narrowed her eyes and thought for a moment. “The airdrome in El Paso will be all lit up, so we’ll have no trouble finding it after the sun is down, and from there we’ll take horses. Fort Bliss is only a short ride from the landing fields.”

Thyme exhaled in frustration. “We’ll be up all night, again.”

“We can sleep during the ride into town. I’ll let you sleep a little longer while I get the body taken care of and gather up some horses.” Jasmine said and laughed, “You need to get used to pulling all-nighters if you want to be an agent. We work around the clock and usually on a deadline. Tonight, we have a mystery to solve, and it starts with finding someone named *Zeus*.”