

Chapter 13

Maritime Action

Houston's replacement as Commander-in-Chief of the Army was Secretary of War Thomas J Rusk, who was now given the rank of brigadier general. When Henry, newly promoted to colonel, was called into Rusk's temporary headquarters to be given an important assignment, he found Rusk in the process of being fitted for a uniform. Only after the tailor had finished taking the new general's measurements and departed, did Rusk sit down with Henry and spell out the details of this mission.

"I'm to travel to Matamoros in order to arrange a prisoner exchange," Henry told me when he got back to our hotel, where, incidentally, I was known as *Mrs Karnes*.

Henry looked gorgeous in his own new uniform. I was actually in danger of falling in love with him, but I sensed that he was beginning to tire of me. For that reason, I did not ask to accompany him to Matamoros, and he did not invite me. Instead, I stayed on alone at Velasco, where the Texas government was now located.

I was wearing dresses again, but I had hired a local woman—a Mrs Frasier, the half-Cherokee wife of a storekeeper—to make me a new set of buckskins. I was never short of money, for Hostería Ballardo had become quite prosperous in the last few years, and my grandfather always saw to it that I received my share of the family's wealth.

Soon, I should return to Béxar and resume working at the tavern. I had already written to my grandparents to let them know that I had survived the war without a scratch. But for now, I was quite enjoying myself on the coast. I watched the ships come and go. I walked along the strand picking up seashells. Gulls, sand pipers, pelicans, and other shore birds fascinated me. This was all so strange to me. I could not get enough. Even the scents were different from any I had ever known. I drank in the experience and relished every minute of it.

On the day that I returned to Frasier's General Merchandise to try on my new buckskins, I noticed on the street in front of the store a group of thirty or so men crowded around a wagon, behind which a drummer was extolling the advantages of a new type of firearm. I was curious, to be sure, but I did not stop to listen.

Mrs Frasier admonished her husband not to enter the back room whilst I was trying on my new duds, which fit me so well that no alterations were needed. Deciding to keep the buckskins on, I asked Mrs Frasier to wrap up my dress, shoes, and ruffled undergarments for me to carry under my arm. I bought and put on new boots as well. Then, agonizing over what style suited me best, I added a hat to my purchases. Insomuch as I still had a perfectly good hat in Béxar, I wanted this new one to look entirely different.

"I say, Mrs Karnes!" exclaimed the storekeeper. "Had I not seen you in a dress just a few moments ago, I'd swear that you were a lad."

"Thank you, sir. That's very gratifying to hear."

Mr Frasier simply shook his head in bewilderment. *What was the world coming to?*

The weapon the drummer was hawking—and he did seem to be selling quite a few—appeared to be some type of wheel gun not much larger than a pistol. Indeed, it was designed to be held and fired with one hand. Working my way slowly through the crowd, I eventually stood face to face with the salesman.

"May I heft it?" I asked in a deep voice meant to sound more masculine than my own natural voice.

"Please do," the man said, handing his demonstrator over butt first.

I was quite surprised by how heavy the weapon felt. It was probably twice the weight of either of my pistols, and yet the bore was very small.

".28 caliber," the man told me. "The weight without loads is just over two pounds. That's very light for a weapon of this type."

"I didn't know there were any weapons of this type," I said.

"Well, no, not exactly. This is the first production-model revolver in history. Of course, European gunsmiths have been fabricating hand-held wheel

guns for years, but they are so expensive that only kings and dukes can afford to own them. This weapon is priced for the ordinary man.”

“How do you fire it?” I asked. “It doesn’t seem to have a trigger?”

“Cock the hammer back,” he instructed me. “And don’t worry. It’s not loaded.”

I cocked the hammer, as directed, and as if by magic, the trigger appeared. There was no trigger guard, but with a retracting trigger, there was no need for a guard to protect against accidental firing. *What a clever design!*

“How many rounds does it hold?” I asked.

“Five,” he said. “Would you like to try it out?”

I nodded, and he loaded the weapon for me. I watched closely, for next time, I should be doing this myself.

This was the brand new Paterson Colt revolver, the drummer explained for all to hear as he finished loading it. To serve as targets, several sticks had earlier been driven into the ground at the far end of a nearby alley. Flour sacks filled with earth had been piled up behind the targets. I stepped to the mouth of the alley, took aim, and squeezed the trigger. My shot just nicked the edge of the stick I had aimed at. I gripped the handle more firmly, clamped my jaw tight, and fired off the next four shots in rapid succession, shattering four sticks.

“Very impressive!” the salesman complimented me. “You’re a natural.”

I bought two of his new-fangled revolvers, then sought out a saddlery to have a custom gun belt and holster made for me. I was feeling very smug in the knowledge that I could now fire ten times before having to reload. Of course, the reloading process was pretty slow, but I still had my rifle and Bowie knife to fall back on, not to mention the two pistols given me by *don* Martín six years earlier. Of course, I should no longer be carrying those pistols on my person, but I certainly meant to keep them in my saddle bags.