

Prologue

1851

The black-haired boy, seven, allowed himself a rare smile. The Texas sun was full and warm on his face as he nudged the horse toward the beckoning prairie.

The kind old man who owned the livery stable, and who let him sleep inside it in exchange for helping with the animals, didn't mind if he occasionally exercised the horses. He seemed to have a way with them and fed, curried, brushed, and watered them every day with great care. He stood on a stool to reach their long, curved necks and their wide backs and gave them apple slices as a special treat.

A few months ago he and his mother had escaped the boy's father and his heavy fists. Diego Chandler Armijo, who had always been called Chandler by his mother, had never slept so well, even though they had no beds. Each night they took their rest on pallets of straw, wrapped in blankets and lulled to sleep by the snorting and stamping of the horses and mules. He slept deeply and rarely dreamed of his hateful father now. Even the massive bruises his father's fists had left on his mother's body had faded, though he knew the scars inside would not.

He let the horse have full reign, savoring the feel of the powerful animal's muscles moving beneath him and the hot, dry wind on his face. He'd learned to ride when he was very small, and he rode without saddle or spurs, instinctively guiding and commanding the horse.

He lost track of time and when dusk began to wash over the land in streamers of purple and blue he turned back. It was well past their usual supper time, and he hoped his mother would not be disappointed in him for being late. She was patient and never yelled at him or lost her temper, but when she was troubled, she often frowned and twisted a lock of her hair in her fingers. He hated to disappoint her.

Dallas, the livery owner, had just come back from a three-day stagecoach job that morning, and Chandler looked forward to hearing his stories. Nights were often spent with just the three of them in the soft murmur of conversation after a simple but filling meal.

This time he was greeted only with the sounds of restless animals. No drifting sounds of a man and a woman talking easily or the clank of tin plates against a wooden table or the snap and scrape of spoons against the sides of bowls. And though the shadows were thickening, no lanterns were lit.

In the black, yawning darkness, he led the horse to the first stall and closed the stall door. "Mama?" he called, finding and lighting a lantern, the wick hissing to life. He carried it toward the back of the livery stable when she didn't answer him.

He froze as his eyes fell on the old man. Dallas was on the floor on his back, a bullet hole in his forehead, his eyes open and unseeing. His wire-rimmed spectacles had been knocked from his round face, and blood stained his forehead and his shaggy, gray beard. Frantic now, Chandler followed a lattice of blood and found his mother on her straw pallet, bleeding from a knife wound to her middle.

She was still alive.

He fell to his knees beside her, setting the lantern on the ground where it cast bars of light in the coal-black darkness.

He held her in his arms. He did not need to ask her who had done this.

His father, a man they called El Lobo, had found them. The Wolf had struck.

If only Chandler hadn't been late! If only he hadn't lost track of time!

He tore a strip from his shirt and used it to try to staunch the flow of blood. His mother shook her head, her green eyes sad. "It is too late."

Trembling, he kissed her cheek softly and cried.

"Run," she said. "He's out there, looking for you. But he'll come back. I don't know how much time you have until he returns."

"I will not leave you, Mama!"

"You must go now. Before he comes back. Run and hide! Be like a shadow in the night. He must not find you. This is my dying wish. Promise me."

"I promise," he said quietly. "He will not find me, Mama. Oh Mama...."

She began to gasp for breath and he held her tight.

"Find a woman...named Mary Kate Mohanan. She's here in Texas. Find...her ranch. She will help you. Trust...no one else."

She went slack in his arms and he knew she was gone.

He sobbed and held her even tighter. He didn't want to let go. But he couldn't linger, not even to try to bury her. The Wolf was near.

The boy had made a promise and he would keep it. Today he would run. He would be like a shadow in the night. But one day he would avenge her death. And he would never run from anyone or anything again.

The first thing he took was Dallas' Colt pistol and some cartridges. He knew where Dallas kept the gun and ammunition, hidden beneath a loose floor board. Dallas had taught him how to fire it. He put the cartridges in his pocket and tucked the heavy pistol into his waistband.

Then he grabbed whatever clothing and food was closest at hand, shoving everything into a small sack. He moved woodenly and clumsily but had the presence of mind to grab a canteen of water and a small bag of corn for the horse. He hoped the horse had enough stamina left to carry him several more hours at a fast pace even though they'd just been out riding. His life depended on it. He didn't ride the other horses as often, and a mule wouldn't do.

As an afterthought he grabbed his threadbare coat from a peg on the wall and slid it on. Summer would soon turn to fall and though the days were hot, a breeze from the west could be cool at night. And he would have no walls around him to keep the wind away.

With his mother's bright blood smeared on his hands and clothing and his cheeks wet with tears, he tied the sacks to his belt and led the horse from the stall. He rode fast and furiously for miles, the horse in high feather, until time became a shiny, obsidian blur, a tendril of inky madness stretching on forever beneath a cold, sterling moon.

The sand and dust of the wide plains stung his eyes but he kept on, putting as much distance as he could between himself and the livery stable. He had two thin slices of bread, a hunk of beefsteak, and a scant amount of water with him, and only one extra pair of socks and an extra shirt. No one gave a damn whether he made it safely to Mary Kate Mohanan's ranch. The one person who had truly cared for him during his short life was gone.

He had only been separated from his mother once before, when Comanche had raided their settlement and taken him captive. He'd escaped a few months later when a young brave, Walks Tall in Grass, became jealous of him and pushed him from his horse while the two of them were hunting. Chandler had managed to escape that day and, miraculously, make his way home. He'd hidden himself in snow banks and eaten whatever grass and weeds he could find buried beneath the snow.

He needed another miracle now. Only this time, if he made it to safety, his mother would not be waiting for him with her gentle smile and protective arms.

Overcome with exhaustion, his horse needing rest too, he stopped on a hillside thick with brush and live oaks, agaritas, and persimmons. There was a small stream nearby, and the water smelled all right, nothing sharp or sour about it. Shaking, he washed the blood from his hands and splashed water on his face, taking a long drink. Then he refilled his canteen, fed and watered the horse, and tied the reins to a low tree limb.

He thought the horse seemed glad not to be pulling a stagecoach filled with passengers and all manner of things odd to this place stuffed inside or strapped to its sides, moonlight washing its red and yellow trim, its enormous elm wheels rocking and

clacking...turning and turning...sculpting new paths beneath rags of sky and cold stars that shone like winks of polished silver.

His stomach grumbled. Unfortunately, the persimmons wouldn't be ripe until the fall. But he could eat the agarita berries. To avoid being cut by the sharp, spiny edges of the leaves, he found a stick and whacked the bush until some of the berries fell into his other palm. They tasted sweet and slightly tart. He took a bite of the bread he'd brought with him and a bite of beefsteak, saving the rest for later.

Then, with sleep pressing down on him, he all but collapsed onto the ground, his meager coat no comfort against his nervous shivering even though he brought the collar up high around his neck. He had loaded the revolver earlier and the weight of it in his hand brought a different kind of comfort as he searched the shadows. Looking up at the trees, he spied a majestic blue-gray falcon perched on a branch, the wood curved and contorted by years of heat, like a bent, pointing finger. The falcon scanned the earth, its pale eyes alert in a proud face, the light of the stars fanning off its beak.

He thought of Walks Tall in Grass, who would be envious if he knew Chandler had been visited by an animal guide, one that had chosen to reveal itself to him during a time of great trouble. The falcon was a sign of harmony and soul healing, but at the same time a bird of prey, a masterful hunter with deadly speed, accuracy, and grace that often captured its quarry mid-flight. Some Indians believed the falcon resided in the Upper world with the spirits of the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars and stood for order and light.

Chandler felt small, insignificant, a nothing boy with a past spurting out behind him and no promise of a future ahead. He took courage in the fact that the bird seemed to follow him and guide him as he rode blindly through the days and nights, hungry, thirsty, lost, and alone.

During the longest, darkest parts of the nights, he often whispered the name of the woman his mother had told him to find, over and over, so he wouldn't forget it, the sound

*like the comforting chirp of a prairie cricket...Mary Kate, Mary Kate, Mary Kate
Mohanana...a soft, scratching wish borne on the wind....*