

# CHAPTER 1

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Rolling clouds, big and gray, piled overhead. Somehow they seemed close enough to touch. Yet for the woman on the ground, there was no euphoria, no childish wonder in pointing out shapes or chasing daydreams; those clouds, so dark, so dreadfully near, reminded her of one thing: *death*.

She couldn't move, her spine crushed with the impact of the fall. If she closed her eyes, she could see the stagecoach whirling round and round, she could hear the screams of men, of horses, her own. Strange how she knew it would come to this - a lonely place, a stretch of road, and those clouds.

"Help!" her lips moved. "Somebody, please!"

*Squeak, squeak, squeak...* the wheel on the stage hadn't stopped moving. What was it? An hour? Two? A horse whinnied; a brightly colored scarf floated over tumbleweed and prickly pear; a twisted arm, scarred and bloody, lay beside her, tiny fingers caught in her hair.

"*Would you like a taffy?*" she had said. Four of them stood at the depot: herself, a traveling clerk named Rolo, Leonard Pruitt and his little girl. It was the child she had been drawn too. Bright blue eyes, golden curls, rosy cheeks - so much like another girl, a baby. The eyes were different, the hair maybe, but that innocent smile...

"*May I, Daddy?*" shyly, she reached up.

"*Say thank you to the lady, Susie.*"

"*Thank you.*"

Now the taffy sat buried in dirt and the wheel...*squeak, squeak!*

"*You're going in circles, Liv. Don't you understand?*" Dave Kent was before her, tall, thin and young. The gray suit looked fine on him, all pressed and starched and ordered. That was just like him. Ordered. "*I love you. Marry me.*"

She had pushed him away. *"You're going off to war. I may never see you again."*

*"Don't you love me, Liv?"*

*Him? Love him?* Dave Kent couldn't give her what she needed. He was too serious, too religious.

*"Look at me!"* she cried. *"I have so much to live for! I want adventure and excitement!"*

*"Liv..."*

*"Maybe someday I'll settle down. Not now, Dave. Not with you."*

Singing at the poker hall had been adventure. The rodeo cowboy with a slow smile and easy laugh had been excitement. Where were they now? Where was she?

*Squeak...*

"Oh, Dave, you were right!" Tears trailed her cheeks. She had been running to Wolf Hole, remembering the image of that tall man with a Bible tucked under one arm, and kindness on his face. Once she thought him silly. *Once.*

"I tried, Dave. Really, I tried. But God doesn't answer. Why doesn't He answer?"

"Hello, Olivia." A shadow darkened the sun. "Expecting me?"

"Milo!"

"That's right."

He hunkered beside her. A weed clung between stained teeth, bobbing with the motion of those wide, thin lips. Slightly rugged, slightly handsome, Milo Slaton was more boy than man. Dark hair swept low as he cocked his head.

"Well, well, my dearest Olivia. It sure is a pity to find you like this. It sure is. Of course, you should've known better than to try to outsmart the old man."

"I - I didn't do it to hurt Seth. I did it to get away from you."

His laugh turned his blue eyes to slits. "I've got to hand it to you, Liv. You're a riot." He held a gun. "Most women would be flattered. But I guess that's water under the bridge. I'm sure you want to get out of this mess, so why not tell me what you did with the money?"

The cold barrel pressed against her cheek and she couldn't pull away.

"I can't! I can't tell you! You'll never find it, Milo! Not ever!"

His smile vanished. "Why you..." he grabbed her throat, squeezing, pressing. "You tell me where that money is, Liv, or I'll kill you! Hear me?"

The world was spinning, the wheel squeaking.

"Dave!" she gasped.

"Tell me! Tell me! Tell me!" Milo struck her with the butt of the gun. Blood splashed on his jacket, on his face, but he didn't stop.

*Bang!* A bullet whizzed by. He spun to see a brawny Mexican, wide sombrero bouncing from his back, running, sliding down the hill. A string of angry Spanish ended upon sight of the woman, no longer recognizable, no longer alive.

"What did you do to her?"

"Nothing, Vicente!" Yet the gun, stained red, said it all. "The - uh - stage crashed. That's not my fault!"

The Mexican knelt. "Perdoname," he whispered, covering her with the scarf. He crossed himself.

Milo backed away. "Maybe we should get going, huh? We'll tell the old man it couldn't be helped."

Slowly Vicente raised his head. Anger burned from round eyes, black as the hair on his head, black as the caterpillar of a mustache dotting his upper lip.

"We can think of another way to find the money!" cried Milo. "Don't look at me like that!"

"Yahh!" with the growl of a bear, the Mexican was on his feet. He had Milo by the shirt, throwing him against a rock wall. "You killed her! You beat her with your pistol! Just like Carmela. Just because you are full of hate!"

"Get your hands off me!"

"Someday, Milo, I kill you! As God is my witness!"

"Try! Go on, try it! Cause I'll take you with me! Remember that, Vicente!"

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**R**umble...thunder shook the hills as Kane knelt, a fist full of bluebonnets and Indian paintbrush. He had grown to hate these Texas storms.

*Dave Kent, Beloved Sheriff*

1825-1881

The words were cold, the headstone gray and silent. Such a pitiful memorial to the finest lawman Wolf Hole had ever known. He swept aside a dried clump of flowers, raindrops speckling dirt. Or were they tears?

“I didn’t get to say goodbye!” he choked. “You didn’t let me say goodbye!”

There was another grave, another headstone, and a name: Wesley Dalton. How many had tried? Yet it took a coward to finally pull it off. *The man who killed Dave Kent*. He would be remembered for that.

“You said death isn’t final. I want to believe you, boy. I do! It’s just that you’re here and...” Kane buried his head. His silver hair was long now and a beard darkened his face. A month’s time had seen him locked inside that empty building at the edge of town, allowing no visitors, not even the sun.

He looked down at the badge on his shirt and it was that day all over, so black, so bittersweet. Dave’s body hung over his horse, arms and legs swinging, polished boots caked with mud and slime.

“*He told me to give this to you,*” Cash extended blood-smear hands. In the middle sat a tin star, still gleaming, still bright. *Sheriff. “He wants you to wear it, Kane.”*

He took it, even cursed at it; yet for the most part he just sat and stared, afraid to touch it, afraid to pin it on. When the looking got to be too much, he shoved it in the desk drawer with Dave’s gun and a bottle of whiskey.

Now his back ached from the bed in that narrow cell and the bottle was half gone. Mayor Stillman pounded on the door once or twice, Cash tried reasoning with no luck, while the man inside, broken and confused, threw his head against the wall, an empty glass rolling across the floor, whiskey drops splashing the open Bible at his feet.

What did the townsfolk expect? They hated him for his Indian blood. Nothing had changed. Not really. Sure, Cash stood on those steps and backed him. He talked big: Dave’s

heroic death, his struggle to hang on, his parting wish that he, Kane Sparks, wear the badge of sheriff of Wolf Hole...

"I'm not sure I'm ready, boy. It's not like I planned to stay in this town, you know? I sure as heck didn't plan on you up and dying. Tell me, David, what am I supposed to do?"

The breeze picked up, swirling red earth into dust devils, whipping shirt and vest, drying tears as they fell. It was right for old Mrs. Clipper to worry. He had lost weight and sleep. His chest heaved with a great sigh. *How he had lost!* A friend, a brother... Maybe Dave didn't make headlines like Garrett or Earp, maybe he was dirt poor and alone. Maybe. Kane only knew that the tall man with the kind face meant a great deal to him.

*Rumble...* Slowly he stood and squished on his hat. Cowboys clustered across the street, blacksmith Joe scrutinized from the livery, but no one dared get close. They had come to accept the bolted office and drawn shutters, the quiet street and even quieter deputy. They seemed to be watching, waiting, wondering...would he take up the badge?

Kane ducked his head all the way to the depot. He was not out by choice. Slaton and his boy had been cited in Turtle Creek, just south of Kerrville. In a matter of weeks they would hit town. Then there was the eight o' clock stage. Twice in thirty years the Guadalupe Line missed its run through Wolf Hole. Both times had been due to Comanche raids. Now that most of the Indians had moved onto reservations, Kane had no fear of any real rampage. Still something was amiss. It left him edgy, restless.

"Hey, Deputy!" Tripp Hutch poked his head through the window. The depot served as an all-in-one stop for telegrams, mail, train tickets and the like. He glanced at the star on Kane's shirt. "Wish the stage would get here. It's got me worried."

"Did you wire San Antone?"

"Yep."

"What'd they say?"

"Oh, nothing - ceptin' the stage left and was making good time. Course you know the road could've been washed out, what with the rain and all. Maybe Scully had to take a longer route. Snake River, you think?"

"Hmm...maybe. Any messages for me?"

"Not today. But I wanted...oh!" eyes bulged. "Oh, I almost forgot! This package has been sitting around for weeks. I would've sent it over with Cash, but it slipped my mind. To