

Prologue

Somewhere along the Navidad River, June, 1821

Fergus Kincaid wiped away the sweat dotting his brow with his sleeve and gazed out over the yoke of his lumbering oxen toward the river.

The Navidad wasn't much of a river. There were legends of mysterious creatures roaming its brushy bottoms, but Fergus grew up listening to stories of kelpies in the lochs of his native Scotland, and he wasn't about to let a never-seen being haunting the Navidad scare him away from his destiny.

He'd left his home in the Scottish Highlands in search of a new life in a new land. After ten years of farming in Virginia, the incentive offered by the Mexican government for Anglo settlers to relocate was hard to resist. With his newly issued land grant entitling him to one hundred and seventy-seven acres of land, he packed up his wife and two young sons, piled their meager belongings onto a wagon, and joined three hundred other families led by Stephen Austin to plod over roads no more than wagon ruts toward his future. The fact that the territory was already inhabited by Indians was outweighed by the promise of opportunity on the Texas frontier.

While most of the families chose to settle in the fertile valleys of the Brazos and Colorado rivers, Fergus selected a patch of land straddling the Navidad. Beneath the shade of a tall, gray-brown cypress tree with stringy bark and gnarled roots he built a sod house of bricks made from packed dirt and grass that was cool in the heat of the day, warm when the temperatures dipped at night, and strong enough to withstand the wind that blew ever-constant across the Texas landscape.

From sunrise until sundown Fergus toiled, tending the animals, hunting and catching food, and plowing the land. He didn't own any horses because the Indians would have driven them off as fast as he could raise or buy them. His only wagon had a wooden axle and a plank laid across the top for seats, and his team consisted of a single yoke of oxen. But the land was fertile, and game was in abundance, with whitetail deer and turkey along the river bottom, and ducks, doves and catfish for easy catching. In the evenings, the family sat around the clapboard table eating from wooden platters, with forks made from joints of sugar cane. Later, by the light of a fire, he sang Highland ballads and Kate read the Bible. She talked wistfully of friends left behind, while he extolled the virtues of all that was possible on the vast frontier. The only thing they did not talk about was Indians.

On this day, while Fergus went on with his plowing beneath a blistering sun, eight-year-old Denver picked up chips in the pasture left by roaming herds of buffalo. But as his mother had a strong dislike for cooking with them, he piled them in a shady spot and set out to collect the bundles of prairie grass she preferred. She would twist them together and tie them tightly, and the tighter they were tied, the longer they burned. Hay cats, she called them, and he had watched her cook many an egg over a fire fueled by those hay cats.

Five-year-old Dallas finished gathering eggs in the chicken roost and headed to the river to cool off on the slip and slide Fergus created by splashing water up the bank of the river so that the boy could slide down into the water.

A little further up the river, Kate Kincaid scrubbed laundry on a washboard using the soap she'd made from cooking ashes, animal fat, and salt. When the clothes were cleaned and rinsed,

she draped them over the tops of bushes to dry. Although she was lucky enough to have strapped a spinning wheel onto the wagon that carried the family to this place, they had no sheep from which to card wool to spin into cloth, so her family had to make do with the clothes they brought from Virginia. But the journey west had taken a toll on their clothing. Her ankle-sweeping skirt and the white bonnet that shaded her face from the sun were torn and worn thin. Her husband's and sons' clothing suffered the most damage, however, so she fashioned loose fitting deerskin shirts for them that were no more than two tanned deer hides laced together with openings for the head and arms. If wet, a buckskin shirt had to be worn until it was dry, otherwise it would become too stiff to wear. Fergus learned that the hard way when he'd been drenched in a rain storm and she'd had to cut him out of his britches.

They'd been on the frontier only two months and Kate already lost count of all the times she had asked herself what she was doing here. This was her husband's dream, not hers. Texas was heaven for men and dogs, but hell for women and oxen. Here there were bears, panthers, wolves, coyotes and foxes, heat, flies, and dirt. And weariness, from the moment she woke in the morning until she closed her eyes to sleep at night. Yeast for leavening was scarce, and flour, when she could get it, was at a premium, rendering her hardtack biscuits as hard as a terrapin. When a man undertook the journey west to fulfill his dream, his capabilities were sure to be appreciated and his energy rewarded, but what was her reward, she griped to herself. Stiff buckskin and buffalo chips?

"How's ma bonny lass today?"

Kate turned to the sound of her husband's Scottish brogue.

"That corn crop will be a big help," he said as he came to stand beside his wife. "The seeds Ah'm sewin' can be eaten fresh or dried to last through th' braw winter months ahead."

"It will be a welcome change from the wild game and honey we've been living on," she conceded.

Looking over his shoulder, he surveyed the rows he had plowed in the Texas earth. "When th' cornfield is sewn an' th' hand mill to grind th' corn fur bread is built, th' rest o th' land can be cleared fur cotton. One acre o land well cultivated should yield aboot two thousand pounds. At an average price o eleven cents a pound, then Ah can build th' proper hoose Ah promised ye, o logs with a puncheon floor an' a stone chimney, with th' kitchen inside, an' glass windows instead o wooden shutters an' deer hides for curtains. One day mebbe we'll e'en raise sheep an' cattle. There's enough cattle roamin' wild with no marks o ownership on them." He shifted his gaze to the river. "Oor wee laddie is havin' a bit o fun."

"He looks more like you every day," Kate said of the boy who was splashing in the water.

Clipping an arm around her waist, Fergus turned her toward the distant prairie. "Ah dinnae ken if there's a more bonny sight than that," he said of the colorful carpet of wildflowers that stretched to the far horizon.

Kate pushed the bonnet back off her head, brushed away the hair that the ever-constant wind blew across her face, and smiled. Her husband's dream of harvesting white gold, as the settlers called cotton, and the promise of a log house with a kitchen inside instead of outside, was enough to provide a glimmer of hope on which to pin her dreams. She forced her misgivings aside, content for the time being to hear her husband talk hopefully of the future and to watch her youngest son reveling in the novelty of the present.

Suddenly, thunder rumbled across the earth. Kate glanced upward, but saw only a cloudless sky with no sign of rain on the horizon. The rumbling grew louder. The ground beneath her feet began to shake. A sound unlike anything she had ever heard rose up behind her. Whirling, she

saw an enormous dust cloud sweeping across the land from the north. She gave her husband a quick questioning look, but the expression on his face turned her blood to ice. She knew in an instant what it was even before she heard his loud, shrill cry.

“Indians!”

A fear unlike anything Kate had ever known welled up inside of her. Her thoughts splintered into blackness, and her lungs froze. Paralyzed, all she could do was stand there, the wind whipping the tattered hem of her homespun dress around her ankles as the dust cloud coalesced into something alive.

“Gie yerself an’ th’ wee jimmies inside!” Fergus yelled.

She felt his hands pushing her toward the soddy, his fingers harsh, demanding that she act.

“The boys!” Kate’s voice tore from her throat, high-pitched and desperate. “Denver! Get your brother!”

“We’re coming ma!” she heard eight-year-old Denver shout.

Inside, Fergus pulled his rifle from its pegs on the wall, while Kate ran about frantically pulling the wooden shutters closed. They could hear the oxen bellowing in the tilled field and the hens squawking in the roost as the thunder of horses’ hooves exploded on all sides of the soddy.

“Gie doon!” Fergus shouted.

Obedying her husband’s panicked order to get down, Kate crouched against the wall of mud bricks as he aimed his rifle through a slit in the wooden shutter and fired.

The shot exploded in Kate’s ears. She felt herself shaking. At any moment the door would burst open and they would all be killed. But the moment she feared did not come.

The air outside filled with wild whoops and cries as the invaders swept past like a cold, dark wind. Had Fergus’s shot scared them off? Did they keep on going because they saw that there were no horses to steal?

Kate shrank back and looked at Fergus in horror. He met her eyes, and then moved his gaze about the room. His face turned white, and confusion seemed to overtake him.

From where she crouched against the wall, Kate felt trapped in the crushing grip of her husband’s expression. Tearing her stricken gaze away, she looked around. Denver was hiding beneath the clapboard table, and Dallas—

Where was Dallas? She glanced wildly about the room. “Denver, where’s your brother?”

“I was scared, ma. I didn’t—”

Her lungs froze and her heart exploded. Without waiting to hear more, she ran to the door and burst outside. In her haste and confusion she hadn’t even noticed that Dallas had not made it inside, but an audible groan of relief spilled from her lips when she saw him by the river, the sunlight reflecting off the tufts of light brown hair that stuck out from beneath his straw hat. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, and she caught herself thinking that he was such a handsome little fellow. She opened her mouth to call out to him, when suddenly, something big streaked past her in a cloud of dust and dirt. Blinking the haze from her vision, she watched in horror as an Indian astride a black horse bore down on the boy.

“No!”

Crying out, Kate plunged forward, calling upon every ounce of strength in her thin body to catch up to the boy. With panic rising in her throat, she thrust out her hand and managed to snag the wet sleeve of his hickory striped shirt. The straw hat flew from his head as she pulled him toward herself, but it was too late. The mounted Indian leaned to one side and yanked her son out of her grasp, sweeping him up onto the horse without breaking stride.

“Kate! Come back!”

Her husband's shout was drowned out by the sound of her own heart-wrenching scream. She ran after the retreating horse, stumbled, got up, and kept on running.

"Ma! Ma!"

Her son's frantic cries for her were cut short by a fit of violent coughing. It was something he did whenever he was afraid. She'd always been able to comfort him and calm his fears, but not this time.

Far out onto the prairie she ran, until the horse and rider disappeared over the horizon, and all that remained of her son was the sound of his coughs echoing in her brain and a tattered straw hat skipping along the ground on a gust of wind.