

# PROLOGUE

The mare followed at a distance. Twiggy undergrowth as tall as the saddle horn scratched at her on either side. Overhead a canopy of branches arched toward the sky from the broad trunk of a single, enormous maple tree. The late afternoon sunshine intensified its gold-edged leaves, a gilded warning that autumn approached

The man took no notice of the narrowing trail, striding onward with a purpose that contrasted sharply with the mare's hobbling gait. The hitch in her step had deteriorated to a three-legged limp after only a few minutes of riding. When she could no longer bear his weight the man dismounted.

"Useless."

An edge in his voice made the mare's ears prick up. She flicked them back and forth. The man walked to her side, unhooked the throatlatch and slid the bit quickly from between her teeth. The mare hung her head as he snapped a lead rope to the worn halter.

"Come on, then. I don't have all day."

And so she followed him down the unfamiliar trail, stepping quickly every time he jerked on the lead, sputtering at face level spider webs.

They finally entered a small clearing surrounded by Douglas Fir trees. The grass, protected by shade, was still green and growing. Alpine strawberries, crimson from the lateness of the season, were scattered here and there like tiny gems. Their sweet fragrance hung in the still air. It was the perfect place for a cozy picnic with a lady. *Next time*, the man thought. He touched his hip, fingering the solid weight of the .357 Magnum.

Walking to the mare he pulled the latigo free, loosening the saddle. It was good leather, well worth saving. With a calloused finger he

traced an imaginary triangle on the mare's forehead and dropped the lead rope.

"Go ahead; git yourself some lunch, girl." He backed up several steps.

The mare did not eat. She followed after the man, searching his body language for a familiar cue.

"Go on now!" The man raised his arms, flapping his hands at her. When she did not move he smacked her jaw with the heel of his hand.

"Good God Almighty—I said git!"

The mare faltered. Slowly she lowered her head, allowing the grass to tickle her lips as they hovered over the earth. Her eyes followed the man.

"There ya go."

He spoke soothingly, but the mare was not comforted. She watched his hand move to his hip and pull at the object hanging there.

"Ya gotta make this hard," he grunted. "Women always do."

He slipped seven rounds into the cylinder. Seven was overkill. Only'd take one round, well placed. He backed up, aimed at a spot above the mare's left eye, and pulled the trigger.

The stiff crack shattered the silence. Invisible life lurking in the bushes scurried away. The mare dropped her head, her legs buckling. Slowly, gracefully, she slumped to the ground as if laying down for a nap on a balmy day.

The man walked to her side and considered his handiwork. The mare had fallen on a small rise and gravity forced the oozing blood over her eye into a trail that ran down her neck and pooled near the shoulder. The man watched, fascinated, as the blood brightened the mare's most distinguishable feature, a large patch of rust-colored hair that stamped her otherwise grey body. It reminded him of a film in sepia tone that suddenly changes to full color.

The strange marking—now a rich magenta—had stood out as an anomaly from the moment of the mare's birth. Like an upside down ice cream cone he'd thought at the time. The "cone" began, point up, at the wither and spread into a large uneven oval that extended over the shoulder. At first the marking had been part of the mare's odd appeal. His friends were not intrigued.

“I got about as much use for them horses as I got for the friggin’ camel jockeys who bred ‘em.” Shaking his head, the man’s buddy flicked a cigarette butt in the mare’s direction. He took a sip of Budweiser. “Git yourself a real horse, Hombre. This freak of nature don’t fit the bill.”

Over time the man had come to the same conclusion.

He pushed at her shoulder with the toe of his work boots. He’d forgotten how much blood one round could make. The man stepped aside, wiping the heavy tread of his shoes on a spongy patch of grass. He felt a twinge of guilt. The mare had been a good horse. No arguing that. She’d had the most soulful eyes he’d ever seen on a beast. She seemed to know his thoughts and wishes a split second before he expressed them. Damn uncanny. *Female intuition*, he supposed.

But he’d tired of her in the way he tired of the women who wandered in and out of his life. High maintenance all of them. He pushed the guilt aside. No sense beating a dead horse. The man smirked at his private humor.

Fact is he’d given the mare a chance to move on, too. The ad in the paper had gotten one response, a young father looking for a horse for his daughter. But the mare turned up lame. Even without the hitch in her step they’d been critical of the marking.

“The hell’s that?”

“A-rabs say mark like that shows some kind of favor—a special blessing.”

“They think their rag heads look good, too.”

And so they had passed on his mare. By then he was saving for a new horse. A Quarter Horse this time; bred in the good ole US of A. The man was not about to spend his hard earned cash to treat a female’s mystery lameness. Not his fault at all.

Satisfied the mare was gone, the man slung his saddle over a forearm in the gathering dusk and left by the way he had come.

Later, under the half light of a waxing gibbous moon, the mare stirred and staggered to her feet.

