

JOAN
JOHNSTON

COMANCHE
WOMAN

A DELL BOOK

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COMANCHE WOMAN

Prologue



IN HIS DREAMS, RIP STEWART ENVISIONED THREE SONS sweating shoulder to shoulder with him as his cotton plantation along the Brazos River blossomed in concert with the new Texas frontier. He had his sons' names already picked out before he ever married Amelia, chosen because she was the only daughter in a nearby Scots family of seven healthy children.

His eldest son would be named Sloan. Sloan would be strong and brave, a proud, capable heir to take Rip's place. Bayleigh would be Rip's surety. He would be the educated one, bred to be a loyal and steadfast help to his elder brother. Rip's youngest son would be named Creighton. Creighton would be the child of Rip's heart, the child he played with, and indulged, and lavished with his love. Creighton would be fiery-tempered and bold, demanding everything the Texas frontier had to offer a man, and getting it.

Unfortunately, Amelia gave Rip three daughters. That did not deter Rip Stewart. He named the eldest Sloan, the second Bayleigh, and the youngest Creighton, and set about to make his dreams come true.

Part I

SHADOW

Prologue



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Part I

SHADOW

Chapter 1

THE REPUBLIC OF TEXAS
1843



THE COMANCHE'S EYES NARROWED IN SPECULATION when he discovered the naked man and woman in the pond where he planned to water his pony. The white woman's belly was swollen with child and seemed to float on the sparkling surface of the pond. As he watched, the white man standing behind her splayed large, tanned hands across her overripe belly and pulled the woman back into his embrace.

The Comanche crouched the instant before the man turned his head abruptly in his direction. He remained absolutely still, and though he was in plain sight, the man's eyes flicked past him, unseeing, and finally returned to the woman. The Comanche smiled wolfishly. He could understand the man's distraction.

The man sought out the soft skin of the woman's neck with his mouth. The Comanche tensed as she leaned her head back into the man's shoulder so his tongue was free to taste her skin. The Comanche closed his eyes when the man reached up with his strong hands to cup the woman's breasts, already full and heavy for the coming child. He imagined holding his own woman, imagined the saltiness of her skin in the heat of the day, imagined the feel of her nipples peaking at his touch.

Disturbed by the sensual images he'd conjured, he blinked his eyes open. The white man reached for the single auburn

braid down the woman's back and released the tie that bound her hair, spreading the silky mass with his fingers so it flowed like molten copper across his broad muscular chest and down his flat belly.

Such hair! What a glorious prize! The Comanche remained still, caught up in the beauty of the woman, the strength of the man. The couple was totally absorbed in one another, touching, tasting. The Comanche's jaw tightened in anger. *A man should not take such foolish chances with the woman who will bear his sons.* He could have killed them both and taken the woman's copper-colored hair to hang from his war shield. He pulled his knife from its sheath and edged closer to the pond. He would teach this *tabeboh*, this foolish White-eyes, a lesson.

The woman smiled teasingly and walked away from the man toward the opposite bank. She picked up his buckskin shirt and threw it to him as he stood in the water. Then she reached down and located a full, linsey-woolsey dress, which she pulled down to cover her nakedness.

When the Comanche was close enough to launch his attack, he shrieked his fierce war cry, a haunting, horrifying sound intended to freeze his victim.

Only this man did not freeze. He howled an equally fierce battle cry as he whirled to face his enemy. The Comanche found himself face to face with a Colt revolver.

The white man grinned, a feral smile, full of satisfaction.

The Comanche looked from the knife in his hand to the white man's gun—and smiled back.

"*Hihites*, Wolf," the Comanche said.

"*Hihites*, Long Quiet," the white man, also known as Jarrett Creed, replied.

"I'm glad to see you haven't forgotten everything you learned during the years you spent as a captive in my village," Long Quiet said in perfect English. He'd learned the white man's language from his *Comanchero* father, a white man who'd traded with the Comanches and taken a Comanche

bride. "I thought you unaware of anything except your wife, and I believed you unarmed. Where did you hide the gun?"

"Cricket threw it to me with my shirt," Creed answered. He joined Long Quiet on the bank of the pond and pulled on his shirt and trousers.

"You wooden-headed ninnyhammer!" Cricket chided Long Quiet, softening her words with a welcoming smile. "It's a wonder you didn't scare me into having this baby a month early."

"My friendship won't always keep you safe from the threat of Comanche attack. You must always be vigilant."

"I'm always careful," Cricket shot back. "It's my husband who gets distracted."

Creed grinned. "You'll have to provide less of a distraction, then." He slipped one arm around his wife's shoulders and rested the other on her burgeoning belly.

"I hate always having to be on guard like this." Cricket wrinkled her nose to show her dissatisfaction. "Isn't there any chance the constant raiding by the Comanches will stop now that President Houston has talked the southern tribes into signing treaties?"

"I wouldn't count on it," Long Quiet replied. "The treaties only bind a few Comanches, and the peace will last only until they learn the white man can't be trusted."

"I don't think you're being fair," Cricket argued. "Most of us don't make a habit of lying, and we only want to live in peace."

Long Quiet's gray eyes turned flinty. "I've spent a lifetime traveling between *Comancheria* and the Republic of Texas. Thanks to Creed's father, I learned a great deal more about the white man's attitudes and ideas when he sent me to school with Creed in Boston. And I tell you, there can be no peace between the Comanches and the White-eyes."

"Does that mean we're never going to get my sister back from the Comanches?" Cricket asked, her voice a mere whisper. "You're still looking for Bay, aren't you?"

“Yes, I’m still looking.”

“Have you heard anything? Has there been any word at all about where she might be?”

Long Quiet saw the pleading look in the eyes of his best friend’s wife and wished he could give her some news about her older sister. For three interminable years he’d been hunting for the tall white woman with violet eyes and flame-red hair who’d been stolen from her father’s cotton plantation by the Comanche called Tall Bear.

He’d searched for Bay among the villages of The People as Long Quiet, the fierce Comanche warrior. He’d searched for her among the wagons and shacks of the *Comancheros* as a half-breed, a gray-eyed Comanche in buckskins who wandered easily between the worlds of the Indian and the White-eyes. He’d even searched for her among the far-flung Texas settlements as Walker Coburn, well-respected friend of the Texas Ranger Jarrett Creed. All to no avail. Bayleigh Falkirk Stewart, second daughter of the richest gentleman planter in the Republic of Texas, seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth.

“I haven’t found her. But I will.” Long Quiet turned away from the hopelessness in Cricket’s eyes and confronted Creed. “I got your message to come. Why did you want to see me?”

“Let’s go up to the house, and I’ll tell you all about it,” Creed said.

Long Quiet hesitated, frowning at the imposing white frame house in the distance that was at the heart of Creed’s cotton plantation, Lion’s Dare. Noticing Long Quiet’s reaction, Creed turned from the direction of the house and headed instead for the shade of several nearby pin oaks. Long Quiet walked beside him, not apologizing for his disdain of the civilized comforts to be found in the house.

Creed helped Cricket sit down, then dropped to sit on the ground beside her, his back supported by a pin oak, one knee