

*The Way*

The wind started in the hollow of the night. It entered Elijah McCloud's dreams like a draft teasing at a closed door, stealing entrance as though it belonged. Out of the south, blowing up the narrow chute of the valley, it stirred the mixed conifers, the sound of the big trees in sway rising like a chorus of murmurs from the bottom of the sea. Beneath the headwalls of Bear Head and Red Crow Mountains, in the sculpted bowl of rock ground out under the heel of the last great glaciers, it blew with such insistence it finally roused Elijah, then wouldn't let him go back to sleep, to return fully to deep slumber.

He lay enveloped in the sound, agitated by the constant moaning of the tall trees, the big Engelmann spruce and western hemlock thick on the valley floor, the red cedar, whitebark pine, and fir all mixed together to the tree line. There was something about the wind, *this* wind, that was unnerving. Elijah lay burrowed like a feral creature in his makeshift earthen den beneath a mammoth old Douglas fir, driven to consider the prospects of the wind whether he cared to or dared to or not.

It wasn't cold enough yet to snow. And it had blown too hard and too long without the gathering patter of rain to suspect there was much moisture in it. Elijah didn't expect the real start of winter much before November, though it could come now, all of a sudden, he knew, with a swift shift of cold air out of Canada that could bring a big storm. An October storm could close the pass, leaving him no option but to hike down through the valley to get out—if leaving was the option he would exercise. But in the slow passage of summer, the urge to follow the old habit of leaving, heading south out of the mountains of Montana when the aspens and alder turned golden, had dissipated, evaporating with little notice. Elijah was usually gone from Glacier National Park by this time, on his way to the Feather River Canyon in the California Sierras. Deciding to stay on this year was not something he had fully considered as much as it had settled over him. He was too tired and worn out to keep up pretenses, if only for himself. Just past sixty, he had simply succumbed to the desire to sleep, felt compelled to it with a longing that was nearly an ache. Like a renegade old bear wanting nothing so much as to be left alone, he found that sleep was the only balm for the ache and regret that filled him, now that Emma was dead.

Two years now and the ache was only deeper, the regret undiminished. Elijah felt the coming of winter with deep anticipation, like the old grizzly with whom he shared the valley. He wondered if Ol' Icy Eye ever had any premonition of death. One eye a frozen, sightless orb, the grizzly must have long sensed the diminished parabola of its soulful orbit on the earth. Elijah felt a kindred spirit to the bear now that Emma was gone, as if the light of his world had been diminished by half—at least half, if not more. The memory of

waking with tears in his eyes, knowing that Emma was dead, still haunted him with a freshness as if it were yesterday. Dead two years—three years in all since he'd last laid eyes on her.

This would be his last fall, his last winter. He was sure of it—determined, in fact. He doubted he'd live to see the new year. Like Ol' Icy Eye, soon after the first heavy snowfall, he intended to retreat into his den for the last, long night of sleep, never to see morning again.

The wind blew without cessation. Beyond the fact of its persistence, its meaning was obscure. Its unrelenting insistence annoyed Elijah more than its presence. Finally, long after the sun had come up, unable to ignore the howling blow any longer, Elijah threw back the covers, uncurling from the narrow cot he'd fashioned in his den under the old tree. He reached for his boots, his dark, knotted hand falling on them without bothering to look. Be nice to have one last stretch of Indian Summer days before the sharp drop in temperature due in late autumn. One could always be hopeful, he thought, running a rough paw over the whisper-thin tuft of white whiskers at his chin after pulling his boots on. He rose and ducked in one motion to pass beneath a long, serpentine twist of tree root that framed the vaulted interior of his den. He made his way through the small antechamber he'd cobbled from scavenged materials, grabbing his old dusty fedora and coat off the root hook where they always hung, and scrambled up the short incline to stand at the entrance of his hut, taking in full measure of the day.

The valley lay before him in one long view, held between twin swells of massive, brown-gray sedimentary upthrust. From peak to peak, the valley was only a mile wide, but ran like a giant trough carpeted in dense evergreen to the far horizon. The valley did not have a name. It was simply the deep groove carved by ice and time and the gradual emptying of an unnamed creek. In places the pale, exposed rock rose two thousand vertical feet and more in sheer fortress walls. Though the valley had escaped unnamed, the names of the peaks that rimmed it marked its desolate remoteness: Eagle Ribs, Brave Dog, Skeleton, Mount Despair. Up the long throat of the valley, directly in the face of Red Crow Mountain, poured the relentless rush of the wind. This wind had a name in Modoc, but Elijah could not recall it. Though he clung to the old ways as best he remembered, it was as if he lived in a world whose voice he no longer understood. It was wind with a voice, but no longer a language. Yet he sensed it sought to speak to him.

*What?* he wondered. *What?* It was a bad day for a Modoc when the world spoke but he couldn't hear it.

Elijah snugged his coat and hat against the wind and stared at the world with gray eyes, eyes startling to behold, pale yet dark, dark yet light, accentuated by the dark cast of his skin. He stared intently beyond Summit Peak, past Brave and Little Dog Mountains, the wind whistling in his ears like a harsh whisper. *What is it?* he wondered, his eyes sweeping the forest, the rise of rock wall, the scudding flood of clouds sweeping across the sky like froth atop a raging river. The valley floor was a pattern of shifting light and shadow as the billowy white clouds swirled beneath the mantle of blue heaven.

The edge of a dream, a discordant disturbance, snagged his mind. Elijah squatted and absently ran a stubby finger through the coarse talus at his feet.

Dream, here? Now? Elijah hadn't dreamed in years. He let his hand circle, his finger trying to pick up the pattern of the dream that had been dislodged by the wind. Again and again his finger circled through the dirt. Nothing. It was there, but not there. It was maddening. He flattened his palm and rubbed the earth smooth. *Odd*, he thought as he straightened slowly, careful not to strain with the foolish, impulsive motion of youth. He squeezed the stiffness from his body. He was tired, bone tired. He had not slept well, caught between the pull of a shadow of a dream and the push of the wind.

Elijah let his eyes sweep over the periphery of his camp, there at the edge of the tree line in the bowl below Red Crow Mountain, taking idle inventory of the landscape. Nothing struck him as being disturbed or triggered recall of the dream. He wondered whether one stopped dreaming as he aged, or merely ceased being able to remember. At moments like this, he was sure it was a *forgetting-to-remember*, as though the lake of dreams froze over the instant the dreamer emerged from it. Why was that? he wondered. Was it something in the dream itself, or simply the act of waking? It was a torment not to be able to remember. It had not always been so. But this time, this dream carried the echo of torment.

He shivered. *I must be crazy*, he thought as he turned and stared at the summit of Red Crow Peak behind him. It was awash momentarily in clouds. He pulled at his thin goatee again as if for balance. "Must be crazy," he muttered to himself as he began to pick his way along the edge of the talus slope, following an old animal trail from the edge of camp, up out of the tree line, out across the steep exposure of the mountain. Elijah hadn't spoken more than a dozen words to another human being in the five months he'd been in Montana. He had kept to himself to such an extent over the last few years, staying to the mountains of Montana in summer, then migrating to the mountains of California in winter, that he had become like an old grizzly when its range is continually reduced: it retreats deeper and deeper into the wild until one day, no one is sure whether the old beast even exists anymore.

It had been more than a month since he'd made the twenty-four-mile round-trip over Firebrand Pass to East Glacier for resupply. He was completely out of sugar and flour, canned goods and rice, and was down to his last ounce of coffee. He'd been living almost entirely on huckleberries the last two days. There had been a Park Service trail crew camped for a week at the small lake on the valley floor, replacing an old footbridge along the river, and he'd not thought it wise to steal down, even during the day when they were out, to take a batch of cutthroat trout from the lake. Five years at Glacier, he'd had only one encounter with the Park Service, after which he moved his camp deeper into the woods, far from any hiking trails. He didn't want to give them any reason to suspect that any form of wildlife not officially sanctioned as endangered had taken up residence in the park.

Without a dependable supplement of trout, he had counted on snaring any of the species of grouse that inhabited the park, especially the spruce grouse, the so-called "foolhen" for the fact that it seemed to have no wariness of humans. But something strange was happening. Although they were usually common, he'd not seen any grouse in several days, though all of his snares had been curiously disturbed. Elijah tried not to dwell on it, working

his way around the sculpted edge of the large basin at the foot of Red Crow Mountain, moving toward the line of snares he'd put out under Mount Despair. His Native instinct still cautioned him to be respectful in pursuit of game. All the while, the wind whistled plaintively in his ear.

Still, he couldn't help but ponder it. It was odd, the snares being disturbed. They were elemental things, primitive, but ever effective in design. Made of a looped bit of line rigged from a limber sapling along an animal run, they were amply clever enough for the dimwitted foolhen. But over the past run of days, though all had been sprung, he hadn't caught a thing. It would take a blow stronger than the wind this morning to set them off, the way he rigged them. Yet he could not find any telltale sign of trespass. When he was a boy growing up on the Sprague River in southern Oregon, his uncle called such inexplicable events "spirit signs." It was not just an idle expression. Though Elijah was only half Modoc, his uncle was full Modoc and took such things as articles of faith. For that matter, so did Elijah.

He stopped abruptly and raised his eyes to the rim of sky that encircled him. The distinct caw of a crow pierced the moaning of the wind. He heard it again, and followed the sound to find the dark speck hanging in the sky like a piece of funeral cloth drifting down and away to the left, slipping behind a rocky headwall, disappearing from view. Such inelegant birds, crows: wings sculling laboriously as if their aerodynamics were not really suited to flying; more terrestrial than aviary. *Odd. Very odd*, he thought. He'd never heard the cry of crows here in the valley. Crows are social beasts, gathering primarily where there are people. There was an obstreperous flock in East Glacier, gathered around the big dumpsters kept full by caravans of tourists. *Odd*, he thought again, studying the track of sky where the black bird had carved its passage. Crow, here? Now? A nervous spasm tickled his spine. Again, a fragment of a dream teased his mind.

Long ago, as a boy on the cusp of manhood, Elijah had dreamed Crow. *Two Crows: one the shadow, the other the light*. Crow was auspicious, powerful, *but difficult, too*, his uncle told him. *Difficult. The way will be difficult*. Twinned crows were a sign of the gift of dream singing. Until Elijah, dream singing had not been witnessed or spoken of with credence since it had failed the ragtag band of Modoc resisting removal by US troops when Uncle was a boy. Elijah shook his head and smiled ruefully. He'd lived a life believing he had seen only the shadow, never the light. *Difficult, yes. Difficult indeed*.

On this morning, under the rush of wind that pushed and shoved like an impatient child, Elijah found the first, the second, and the third snares all triggered. All empty. Elijah cursed his luck, his hunger expanding like a noxious gas. The thought of the long walk over Firebrand Pass to East Glacier for groceries was not how he'd imagined his day. If he left now, it'd be dark before he made it back again. It was a good twelve miles each way with a two-thousand-foot hump to get through the Firebrand saddle. Oh, he'd made the journey in a day numerous times, but seldom on an empty stomach. When the fourth snare turned up empty, it was all he could do to contain his despair.

"Son of a dog," he cursed through clenched teeth, kneeling to finger the empty noose. "*Dirty* son of a dog." With meticulous care, he reset the snare

and stood. He balled his fists and rubbed his kidney points in the small of his back, trying to ease the knots of tension that were building.

“It ain’t too much to ask,” he said to the wind as much as to himself. “All I want is *one*,” he lamented, watching a mountain chickadee dart from a nearby branch into dense growth. Other than the crow, it was the first wildlife he’d seen that morning. The wind was keeping most creatures quiet and close to home.

Elijah turned and headed downslope, into the thick tangle of alder and seedling pines, toward his last trapping point along a small game trail that ran down to its junction with the creek where the creek settled into the valley bottom proper and began its winding course toward the small lake. Elijah pushed his way deeper into the brush, becoming enveloped in the profusion of growth that rose over his head. He picked his way carefully, following the drop of the land southward into the brush, into the wind, toward the river.

The sound of the river was slow rising to the ear, competing as it was with the steady blow of the wind. Elijah knew by feel he was close, but was agitated, disoriented by not being able to hear the river despite the wind. He stopped to check the direction of the cloud movement overhead just to be certain he was still heading south. He pushed ahead, wading through the dense understory, cursing the wind and the run of luck he was having. He broke out of the alder into a glade of ferns where at last the sound of the river rose to greet him. He waded through the ferns, working his way toward the faint game trail that paralleled the river. He was feeling soured on the whole prospect of the day when, coming around a short bend in the trail, he saw the plump, red-eyed spruce grouse standing docilely in the trail, a snare snugged tight around its neck.

Elijah stopped. He stared in surprise, barely able to believe his luck. The bird eyed him curiously but showed no agitation or nervousness. Elijah could almost taste the hot, succulent meat in his mouth. He was about to step forward to claim his catch when something caught his attention out of the corner of his eye. He paused, turned slowly, and sucked his breath. There, not fifty feet away, stood Ol’ Icy Eye, a very large and wildly moody male grizzly, staring coldly right at him with his one good eye.

Elijah stood motionless for a long moment, letting the fact of the big bear register deeply within him. He tried not to reveal anything of the first flush of fright that passed through him. The Montana Blackfeet believed grizzly medicine was powerful—too powerful to be near for long. It could make you crazy. *Spirit with Claws*, they called it. The bear was close enough for Elijah to clearly make out the battle scars around its head from encounters with other solitary males.

Unless a mother with cubs, or a male with a fresh kill to defend, grizzlies prefer flight to fight in most encounters with humans. Ol’ Icy Eye stared mutely, the light in the sighted eye not half as penetrating and disturbing as the dim icy orb that fixed Elijah with frozen sight. The big bear slowly began to swish its head side to side, making low growling noises. Elijah did not fail to notice its ears were pressed back, its neck fur raised, ready for action. For their size, bears have impressive, explosive speed: it would take little more than a couple of seconds for the bear to be upon him in a charge.

“O’ Bear,” Elijah cooed ever so gently, loud enough so the bear could hear him, but not feel challenged. Elijah pivoted slowly at the hips to turn his body at an angle to the bear, to show he was not seeking confrontation. “O’ Bear, now,” he whispered in a low but firm voice. He gazed into the middle distance of the forest, careful not to let his eyes wander back to the bear. “Hey, big grizz,” he said slowly, trying to sound confident, unafraid, but nonthreatening at the same time.

From the trail in front of him, he heard the spruce grouse fuss at the snare that held it. Elijah strained to keep his attention focused. All hint of hunger had fled him. *Eat or be eaten*, an inner voice whispered.

*Very funny*, he thought, focusing to maintain his calm. The bear growled more loudly now, swinging his head vigorously from side to side. In these woods, the grizzly stood at the top of the food chain; man was just another item on the menu. The thought pumped a powerful kick of adrenaline, a dose he could almost taste in the back of his mouth. Elijah tentatively started to tense in order to lift a foot to take a step backward, conceding retreat. His mind raced in calculation of the odds in such encounters. Nine times out of ten, the bear flees. Nine times out of ten, if they charge, it’s only to bluff. One in a hundred results in a mauling. Not bad odds, perhaps, until you’re facing a bear. Elijah began ever so slowly to shift his weight to his forward foot, intending to lift the other to take a small step backward.

The bear exploded in a flash of motion and noise. Instinctually Elijah turned, drawn to the suddenness of the charge. He saw the heat in the iris of the big bear’s lone good eye. The bear rushed like a rocket with unfathomable speed, ripping through the vegetation that only moments before had half shielded him. At the last instant, when Elijah knew that this was no bluff, he started to turn and curl inward into a ball.

He was knocked into the air from the bear’s blow, sent flying to tumble and roll in a thick patch of ferns. Voluminous sound enveloped him, the stench and heat of bear breath searing the side of his face through the small exposed crook of his arm that wrapped his head. Elijah stifled the impulse to cry out, drawing tighter, tighter into a ball. The bear batted him like a toy, knocking him from side to side, his big claws ripping at his coat, shredding a sleeve. Elijah stayed curled but motionless, letting the bear have at him as it wanted. He felt the press of the bear’s wet muzzle against his ear. An angry, hellish, bellicose sound pressed itself into his ear, driven like a rifle shot to the core of his soul. It was both a shock and a primitive marvel that such a sound was part of the living, conscious world. It seemed to grow and multiply in fathomless amplitude. At the highest pitch of the penetrating howl, Elijah was stunned to hear a whisper. Was it an inner voice, or that of the bear? *You heard the wind. You saw Crow. GO.* The whisper filled him with its power, lifted him, carried him a great distance high above the trees, to a great height, higher than the peaks that surrounded him. *GO!*

For several long moments Elijah floated in the sound. He remained motionless. Then, slowly, he began to realize that the roar behind the whisper had ceased. The bear had retreated.

Elijah lay still for an interminable time, as if gathering his spilled life energy up off the forest floor. Once provoked, bears often return for repeat

maulings. In this moment, Elijah wanted desperately to live and lay deathly still so as not to tempt the old bear to return and attack again. Now and again he heard a rustling that pumped a fresh surge of adrenaline into his system. After several minutes, when he was sure that the bear was gone, Elijah lifted his head to peer through the smashed and matted vegetation all around him. The foolhen stood stoically where he'd first seen it, as if waiting docilely for the fate of its day.

Slowly, quietly, Elijah rolled onto his hands and knees and lifted his head to survey the woods. He listened intently. He was surprised now to hear only the wind. The constant rush of the wind in the trees was somehow reassuring. He pushed himself to standing, inspecting himself carefully, as though fearful he would find a gouged wound, a patch of flesh torn free. Other than the mangled coat sleeve and a deep claw mark under his jawline, he'd come through entirely intact. He surveyed the damaged forest floor, pulling a cloth out of his coat pocket to wipe the blood that flowed from the wound. He walked over and picked up his crumpled hat and straightened the brim, re-created the crown. He rose to his full height, tugging on the hemline of his coat as if to compose himself.

Elijah eyed the grouse. The grouse eyed him. He brushed his hands together, knocking the forest debris loose where it had been imprinted when he was trampled by the bear.

He eyed the grouse again, then let his gaze rise and sweep the forest in all directions before returning to the bird. "Did you *see* that?" Elijah whispered incredulously. "Had me all but skinned and in the pot."

He slowly scanned the forest once again, not wanting to trust the bear was gone for good. He shuffled slowly toward the bird and knelt down. The bird blinked, but otherwise showed no sign of fear. Elijah stared at the bird for several long moments. He leaned forward and gently cupped it in both hands as he carefully worked the snare loose. When he had the bird free, he released it. He leaned back on his haunches and considered it.

"I'm a lucky son of a dog," he said to the bird. "I mean *lucky!*" The grouse eyed him and took a tentative step of freedom. It ruffled its feathers, as though reasserting its dignity. It took another step, turned to consider the distant safety of the woods, then turned to eye Elijah again.

He gave it a knowing nod. "This your lucky day, too," he whispered hoarsely, shooing the bird with his hands. "Go." The bird took three or four quick steps away in fright, then stopped and turned to look at Elijah again.

"Go on. Hurry up. Before I change my mind," Elijah coaxed. The bird continued to stare at him. Elijah looked up into the tops of the trees overhead to watch the swaying wash of the wind. "No mistake. Time we both go," he said, studying the sky and the pattern of clouds. He rose and fit his hat to the top of his head.

He considered the bird again. "When the Spirit speaks, you *best* listen," he said. The bird cocked its head to one side, transfixed by his voice. "I'm stubborn, but I'm no damn fool. And if I were you, I'd get along, too, before I change my mind and cook your scrawny ass."

A shiver passed through Elijah and he looked nervously about, worried, perhaps, that he might have angered the spirit of the bear.

“Just kidding,” he said with a meek smile.

Elijah turned slowly, scanning the forest, then started back along the way he’d come, pondering Ol’ Icy Eye and the disturbing resonance of the night’s dream that was caught like a cocklebur in his mind. The big trees swayed and moaned in the wind, and he found himself listening to the world in a way he hadn’t in a long, long time.

He stopped abruptly, frozen. His eyes shifted side to side. He pivoted slowly, his gaze working to pierce the dense understory of ferns and alder. *What?* he wondered, pulled by a vague hesitancy.

“Getting jumpy,” he mused, shaking himself as if to shed a cloak that had fallen over him. Then it hit him: the dream. The mist that had veiled it lifted. He felt the meaning more than saw it. The way would be difficult. Dark. Threatening. *But you won’t be alone. Not alone.*

He eyed the darkest depths of the dense woods. *What the hell does that mean?* he wondered, turning in a full circle as though he expected an answer. A shiver washed through him.

“I’m going batty,” he muttered, wishing to dismiss the whole morning’s cast of taunting agitation.

A shiver washed through him again and he stopped dead in his tracks, taking measure of the moment at the core of his being. It was only then that he fully sensed that what was coming was, indeed, going to be difficult. This was what the dream was about, he realized, the dream he couldn’t remember. This was what it had wanted to tell him. *The way will be difficult.*

*Home . . . And Not Home*

Elijah cursed the dawn's cold. Three days out of Montana, he was yet to cross the Columbia River on a path that carried him true south toward the sun. He shuffled noisily up a spur line on the edge of the Pasco, Washington, rail yard. The clamor of his belongings, his coffeepot and tinware, disturbed a flock of pigeons nesting in the beams of the trestle overhead. He stopped to watch them take flight in a wide sweep over the yard. They circled in the gray morning sky, over the top of silent boxcars, before settling again on the lee side of a yard shack near the old icehouse down near the middle of the yard.

Elijah put down his water jug and blew into cupped hands to warm his fingers. He pressed the fingers of his left hand against the wound on his jawline where Ol' Icy Eye had clawed him. It was slow in healing, and Elijah was worried it would become infected. If the puffy soreness didn't begin to subside, he knew he would have to find some bearberry root to make a poultice to draw out the poison.

The wind kicked up a pair of dust devils and rolled them down the center of the freight yard. He tried to read in the wind what truth there was to talk at the Pasco soup kitchen the night before that the yard was hot. Talk at the kitchen was abuzz with news of two bodies found in a boxcar the week before, their throats slit. It was always hard to know with tramp talk where truth ended and the yarn began. The wind this morning told only of the threat of rain.

He shifted the weight of his bedroll to his left shoulder to ease the dull pain in his right leg. His leg and hip were stiff with pain from sleeping in a weedy field adjacent to the tracks. From behind him to the east in the direction of Walla Walla and the lightening dawn came the low rumblings of a switch engine idling in the hump yard. He picked up his jug and stepped along, keeping close to the brush that grew in the ditch that paralleled the mainline. He heard the honking of fowl. He craned his neck to eye the long line of Canada geese high overhead. The string of birds looked like a dark stitch being drawn through dirty linen. His eyes followed them south, then fell to earth to search for an open car on the manifest going down the Columbia Gorge to Portland.

Elijah spied the lone boxcar with an open door at the same time he spotted movement in the shadow of the underpass at the far end of the yard. He stopped abruptly. He watched as two figures emerged from the underpass. It was clear that they, like he, held one thought in mind: making it to the open boxcar before the freight was called to leave the yard. Unlike Elijah, they were streamlined, without bedrolls, water jugs, or other accessories except that one appeared to be carrying a small backpack. He watched as they

approached the black square of the open boxcar door. They paused, climbed up and in, and disappeared from sight.

Elijah scanned the length of train again. Not a single other boxcar was open. He lurched ahead. He left the mainline and crossed the first set of yard tracks, then the second. He made his way directly out across the open yard and approached the empty boxcar just as the air pressure blew through the brake lines, signaling the engineer was preparing to get under way. Elijah set his water jug up on the threshold of the open door and swung his bedroll in. He slipped his pack in one fluid movement, transferring it to the floor of the car. Clasp ing the lock bar, he swung himself up and into the dark container just as the train started to creak forward. He acknowledged his two traveling companions with a cursory nod, but got neither a wave nor a word in welcome in return. He stowed his gear at the end of the car opposite from them.

*Best to sleep with one eye open*, Elijah thought as he sat down on his bedroll. As the train picked up speed moving out of the yard, he settled back against the bulkhead. He sighed deeply as much from exhaustion as relief, soothed by the familiar rhythm of the rolling freight.

The train crossed the Columbia River just above the confluence with the Snake on the outskirts of town. The train gathered speed as it entered open country, quickening the cadence of rail joints beating beneath the wheels. It was a familiar rhythm, well drummed into Elijah's bones. There was a period of years where pretty much all he did was ride trains, up and down the West Coast, all through the intermountain West. The tempo and constant motion soothed a deep grievance for all he'd lost—his own damn doing, absolutely. Another stretch of years he sought to drown the ache with alcohol. He'd tamped down the impulse over time, but with Emma's death, he went cold turkey. Though he strangely felt her presence painfully close after she died, he wouldn't allow himself to smother it in drink. It was all he had left of her, and he didn't want to lose it or suffuse it in the vapors of alcohol. He'd come to terms with the fact that it was too late to make a difference in her life. Occasionally he slipped off the wagon, usually when he was passing through some town or city where he knew people from the old days. It was why he increasingly spent more time alone in the mountains. "Crossing the flats" could be treacherous. The "flats" were the low ground, out of the mountains, where people pooled into cities and towns. It was too easy to become untethered crossing the flats. When he needed a few dollars, he'd work awhile at a ranch mucking stalls or feeding livestock, but never far from the deepest hold of the mountains. He avoided settlements of any size. The mountains were the only thing that anchored him.

Elijah leisurely pulled his pack open and pawed through his belongings. His hand found what it was searching for. He extracted a large, bright orange that seemingly glowed in the semidarkness of the car. He raised the fruit to his nose and sniffed its succulent fragrance. It smelled of sunlight and the humming of bees. He peeled it slowly, deftly, enjoying the feel of the meaty hide as it came off under his fingers in one long, cool strand. He pulled it apart and separated a single wedge and popped it in his mouth. He bit down slowly, savoring the explosion of flavor.

The long freight rattled along at a good clip beside the Columbia toward the twin cities of Vancouver on the Washington side and Portland across the river in Oregon. Elijah finished the orange and rolled himself a cigarette. He struck a wooden match, touched the tip to the cigarette, and inhaled deeply. He hadn't decided yet whether he intended going all the way to Portland or only as far as Wishram where the tracks forked, one line turning to cross the steel trestle over the Columbia to the Oregon side, the other continuing westward through the Gorge. He smoked his cigarette and stared at the view out the open door. It was only a narrow, vertical slat of light in the darkness from the angle where he sat deep in the back of the car. Pewter sky, dull brown line of high desert, the churning face of the river. It would be a couple of hours before they left the arid high plains and entered the Gorge proper below Wishram. He smoked meditatively, lost in thought, the thin sliver of a view across the river to Oregon enough to generate a dark churning deep within him.

*Oregon. Home. And not home.*

Being Modoc, or partially so—enough to carry the burden of it—Elijah's heritage was that of displacement. Once, long ago, his people had simply called themselves The People. But *Modoc* now was communally thought of as only *less than*: less than whites, less than human, less than they once were. As a boy, he had been told by his uncle he possessed the power of dreaming, the ability to *see* what was to come. He was a *dream singer*. It was not something that was talked about openly, whites not wanting to hear anything of pride from a Modoc. But his uncle had never given up hope that one day it would be possible for the Modoc to be The People again. It was a destiny, Uncle told him, that Elijah was born to, to bring dream singing back to The People. *Don't ever forget. Ever*, Uncle constantly instructed him. *No matter what happens. No matter how difficult the way.*

Memory of that time came back to Elijah in glimpsing the Oregon side of the river. The vague disturbance of the shadow dream his last night below Red Crow Mountain also came back to him. He'd not forgotten, though God knows, he'd tried. The destiny, like the dream beneath the scuttling wind, had never provided him firm ground to stand on. Like the Modoc homeland that had been taken away. He shook his head: How can one hear what the world has to say—carried on the wind, in dreams, in the cry of birds and the roar of beasts—when the land of The People is stolen and silenced? Or worse, when you do not listen, or hear only what you want to hear?

As a young man, Elijah was graced with many gifts. The one that stood him in the best graces with white men was his gift with horses. His reputation was widely respected, even among whites who wouldn't credit a Modoc with being able to spit. Elijah was a wonder in the ring with a wild horse. He cued on nuance in the quickenings of animals that others could not detect. He moved and breathed a ballet of intention that nervous horses understood. He calmed them with a gaze and soft mutterings. He commanded them with the power of a raised hand, the fix of an eye. It was

magical how he could bring a wild creature to halter, then bridle, then blanket and saddle. He joked it was his *medicine*, but gave it the respect it deserved. By the time he was twenty, his medicine was strong, ensuring him employment wherever he cared to work.

Elijah was handsome, his mixed heritage casting him with a curious blend of features even whites secretly noticed. Though not a big man, he carried the poise and stealth of a wild creature, proud like a stallion, self-possessed like a cat. Most striking of all were his eyes, a gray light radiating in his dark face. There was no mistaking he was not Modoc alone. Elsewhere he might have passed as a curiosity, but in eastern Oregon, in the rain shadow of the Cascades, there was no escaping the enmity whites still harbored for Modoc, gray eyes or not. Displaced by early settlers, forced off their homeland onto a reservation with the Klamath, neighbors and timeless enemies, Modoc history was etched in discord and blood. Even with time and the gift of working horses, Elijah could not escape the dark mark of history. The very fact that he was so clearly of two worlds made him an outlier among whites and Indians alike.

Though the golden day of horses had come and gone in the West by the time Elijah reached manhood, horses remained at the center of the myth of old families in eastern Oregon who had holdings the size of small kingdoms. One such realm belonged to Thomas English, a man who'd carried the confidence of a patriarch even before he had a family. English had emigrated as a young man from Pittsburgh, coming to Oregon just after the turn of the century to stake a homestead in Jefferson County. He'd grown his original stake—west of Smith Rocks on the Crooked River, north of what would prosper into the community of Bend—into a vast holding. Over time, shrewdly and patiently, he'd cobbled it together parcel by parcel, especially during the hard years following 1929. Antelope Creek Ranch was a mixture of timber and rangeland that stretched from the foothills of the Cascades well out into the dry high-desert sage country of the Columbia Plateau. Thomas English prided himself in his ability to discern quality in men as well as horses and selected Elijah as his chief wrangler when Elijah was not much older than he'd been when he first came west from Pittsburgh. Good horses were central to the ranch's cattle business. It was prime employment for any man, and doubly so for Elijah in that English did not carry the burden of history and memory of things Modoc.

It was a good time—actually the best of times in the life of Elijah, those first years on the ranch. Elijah had married his heart's true companion, Emma Roseleaf, a full-blood from a large family from down around Chiloquin. They had their first child, Toby, a son, the first spring they took up residence in the head wrangler's cabin on the English ranch. It was a time when Elijah had ambitions of one day owning his own land, raising his own horses. He did not imagine an empire like English had; he was not as naïve as that. But he was not afraid to envision a Modoc having land of his own, beholden to no one. He could look any white in the eye and know himself to be an equal. And those on the reservation who'd tormented him as a boy, he would know himself as a man despite their slurs.

A way to achieve that had come to him in a dream. Thomas English had won in a poker game a small place down below Klamath Falls, just across the border in California, a homestead with a derelict barn, a dusty place English had no real interest in. The other man had picked it up for next to nothing in a foreclosure sale in 1931, and felt no grief in losing it to four aces. But Merrill was near the heart of the ancient home ground of the Modoc, near Tule Lake and Lost River. Even though Elijah had known only Oregon, born to this century rather than the last, the pull of the past twitched inside him like a phantom limb, a thing cut from the body but still present in the mind, susceptible to aches and pains and spasms, seeking to be assuaged and soothed. This would become home to his family—a kind of repatriation, too, of the spirit of his people with their ancient homeland.

Elijah worked hard for Thomas English and made him money in the selecting and breeding of horses. The two had an amenable arrangement: Elijah agreed to forgo cash at sale for any mustangs he captured on his own time that still ran in wild herds in the high-desert scrubland of eastern Oregon. In return, in five years' time, the place near Merrill would become his. Of the forty or so horses he'd captured in the first four years, all had gone to English except for two, a handsome dappled gray stallion and a bay mare. The stallion, which Elijah called Smoke, and the mare were to be the seed for what he envisioned as a great line of animals.

English, for his part, admired his wrangler's pluck, caring not a wit that Captain Jack, a distant Modoc kinsman and leader of a renegade band, had been the one to shoot and kill a US Army officer under a white flag of truce in the closing days of the old West. English never broadcast his sentiments, but in truth he was a pacifist and thought the government's handling of the Native people a shameful legacy in American history. He treated Elijah with uncommon respect, which set the tone for everyone else on the ranch. Everyone, that was, except English's son and only heir, Marshall. Marshall was his father's only surviving child, one who'd never felt confident of his father's affections. He'd been raised by a housekeeper after his mother died in childbirth when he was twelve. The baby girl, Marshall's infant sister, survived for eleven days, then passed as well, leaving Thomas totally bereaved for months. Marshall was sent away to boarding schools and came home only for summers when his father was the busiest with matters of the ranch. He'd returned to the ranch for good after an undistinguished stint at the university in Eugene and a failed attempt at business in Portland to find Elijah comfortably settled in the nicest quarters on the ranch, outside the big house. Marshall took an immediate and instinctual disliking of Elijah. Elijah regarded Marshall with practiced deference and wariness, being smart enough to steer clear of him as much as possible. He knew of Marshall's reputation in the county, away from the ranch and his father, for intimidation and bullying Indians from the Warm Springs and Klamath Reservations. Marshall was never directly involved in violence, but he was always on the periphery of it. Staying clear of him didn't require much effort on Elijah's part, what with his long hours in the corral and devotion to Emma, who had recently learned she was pregnant again.

Elsa Garnett was Thomas English's sister's only daughter. Though he loved his sister, he detested her husband—Elsa's father. Frederick Garnett was a blue-blooded easterner from a long lineage of interwoven generations of first families of Philadelphia—and God help you should you ever forget it. In sharp contrast, English devoutly believed in the golden rule of the West: that a man's most inalienable right was freedom from his heritage, that he was at liberty to reinvent himself in whatever mold furnished him the fullest expression as a man. So long, that is, as it did not infringe on the rights of any other man.

Thomas English was never able to determine with any certainty what had happened that previous winter, on the eve of his niece's marriage. He had heard variations on two themes: that she had been left waiting at the church for the groom to show; and more darkly rumored, that she'd become involved with a cousin on her father's side of the family, a young man who, as it happened, was the best friend of the intended groom. English always suspected the worst, if only because his sister was completely beyond discussing it. He was delighted, however, when Elsa wired early that spring to ask if she could come and stay awhile at the ranch. Thomas English wired back a purposefully open-ended invitation, hoping to provide his niece the luxury of redefining herself free of her parents' privileged-class bearing.

Elsa Garnett was a striking presence. She was the kind of woman men can't help but notice, not for any intoxicating beauty, but for a remote, alluring ascetic that begged to be deciphered. Marshall English was clearly enamored, if not improbably smitten. Not unattractive, blessed with his father's blue eyes and his mother's sculpted cheekbones, he was nonetheless a pretentious ass. Though he hadn't ever cared to see his cousins—Elsa and her three brothers—when he'd been invited to visit back east, he couldn't see enough of her now that she was in residence on the ranch. Elsa, for her part, seemed unfazed if not altogether oblivious of his adoration.

Over the weeks leading up to her arrival, a kind of mythology grew up around her, fueled by tidbits garnered from conversations overheard in the big house by the housekeeper, maid, and kitchen staff. Elsa was a graduate of Swarthmore College, in Pennsylvania, founded by abolitionist Quakers. She was willful and independent, trumpeting equality of the sexes, often as a guise for doing whatever she damn well pleased. She was an affront to her mother's straitlaced Quakerism and an embarrassment to her father's sense of propriety as a respected banker. She'd had an affair with one of her professors and become pregnant, causing him to lose his job. She'd had to "go away" for a while until the fetus came to term, and then was forcefully separated from the baby at her parents' insistence. The fallout from her failed engagement was the final straw. Both her parents and Elsa looked to her extended trip west as an opportunity to start afresh. In her uncle's mind, he believed that all Elsa ever wanted was to be loved and accepted by her parents for who she was.

The day she arrived at the ranch, she created an immense stir. From the distance of the corral adjacent to the barn, Elijah could not fail to perceive the small drama her arrival was generating among the circle of family and servants gathered around her on the porch of the main house. Other ranch

hands found a reason to ride past just at that moment, though the big yard had been silent and empty all morning. This was no ordinary creature, Elijah could tell; she remained composed and gracious, yet observant and aloof at the same time. She did not fail to take in anything in the surroundings. When she caught him eyeing the spectacle from the shadow of the barn, where he stood holding a young colt on halter, he felt a visceral transmission of energy between them. She held his eyes for a long moment, then turned smiling to one of the cooks who approached, bearing a cool glass of refreshment. Elijah knew she'd taken his measure in that moment, and he knew she knew he knew.

Elijah would look back years later and wonder if it all could have somehow been avoided. It was so much of who he was, who he'd become, it was difficult to know. Elijah was certain that life was made up of countless such moments, molded by happenstance, where the spark of life was deflected, caused to flow in a new direction that was both strange and unanticipated. Did one have any control at such junctures, or was man simply hapless in the flow? Even though he'd recognized the force of alteration at numerous other points in the past, he was always mystified by this one event. He always wondered if, perhaps, everything that followed—losing Emma, his children, himself—might have been averted if he simply had missed that first flashing of Elsa Garnett's eyes.

It began innocently enough. Elijah was in the corral as usual when Thomas and Marshall were preparing to take leave in Marshall's big new Buick for a ten-day fishing trip in the mountains. Elsa had been on the ranch nearly two months, and yet Elijah had managed to completely avoid her presence. As the two men loaded the car, she announced from the porch steps of the big house that she wished to go horseback riding. Fixed in their routine and schedule as men can be once their course is set, the pair, father and son, were impatient to leave. Marshall summoned Elijah, who was shoeing a horse, with a loud shout. Elijah finished driving the last nail before climbing the rails of the corral and crossing to the big house a hundred feet distant. He was aware of being observed keenly by the woman standing in the shadow of the porch, even though he avoided her gaze.

"Miss Garnett needs a horse to ride," Marshall said curtly. "Pick out one that rides well. And make sure it's one of the gentler ones."

"Yes sir," Elijah said simply. "Now? Or can it wait while I get the last shoe on Mercury?"

"I can do it myself," Elsa Garnett interjected confidently, "if you're busy."

"No ma'am, not at all. Now is fine, I guess. Ol' Mercury isn't going anywhere," Elijah said, still avoiding her eyes.

"Well, since you're not busy," Marshall said sarcastically, "I want you to ride with her so she doesn't get lost or hurt."

"That's unnecessary, Marshall," Elsa returned sharply, annoyed at her cousin's condescension. "I don't mean to be a nuisance to Mr. McCloud." Elijah couldn't help but turn his eyes to stare at her. He'd had no idea that she knew his name.

“Not a problem, ma’am,” Elijah said, touching the brim of his broad-brimmed hat. “I’ll be ready in about fifteen, twenty minutes.” He turned and crossed the yard again to the corral.

They rode that day and every day that Thomas and Marshall English were away fishing. Though Elijah was accommodating, he maintained an increasing reserve at the same time he grew more intrigued by this strange woman from the East. A more startling pairing one could not imagine, and yet for the stark differences, there was also an odd sameness in the two. Both were content to ride long stints without speaking. Occasionally, Elsa would ask a question about something they encountered; occasionally, too, Elijah would point something out. As they explored the rim rock of the Crooked River Canyon to the northeast, and the enveloping forest of juniper and ponderosa at the flank of the Cascades to the west, both became inexorably drawn to silently question and consider exploration of something far more compelling and mysterious and dangerous.

On the fifth morning of Thomas and Marshall English’s absence, as they headed out of the corral together, Elijah turned his horse to the northwest. It was a spontaneous, impulsive turning. There was no way of knowing at the time, however, that this singular turn would alter so much of what would soon follow. They rode with Mount Baker flanking them, rising majestically in the distant, dark svelte of the Cascades, still snowcapped in the hot languor between the Fourth of July and Labor Day.

They rode across the newly cut hay fields, riding almost abreast, Elijah slightly advanced, keeping Elsa out of his field of vision as they had become accustomed to riding together. They rode toward the ragged line of distant forest, dull under the glare of the midday sun. Beyond the first line of western juniper, a scraggily, humble evergreen, they entered the thickening of the forest as the mixture of trees increasingly included the tall, red-and-black scaled rise of stately ponderosa. They rode in silence, letting the horses move at their own pace. They rode into a nearly pure stand of ponderosas. Here and there small glades of wild grasses opened before them, lit with a splash of sunlight in sharp contrast to the dim filtered light of the forest. They startled a deer and two yearlings from their day bed at the edge of one clearing, and halted to watch them prance away with regal elegance. When the deer had dissolved completely into the forest, Elijah heeled his horse forward. Elsa followed.

At the edge of another open clearing in the trees, Elijah slowed, then halted. Without speaking, he dismounted. He turned for the first time to face Elsa as her mount drew up beside his horse. Elijah reached out and caught her reins. Elsa sat still, unmoving, staring down at him.

“Come,” Elijah said simply. “I want to show you something.” He lifted his eyes and they stared lingeringly at each other, neither turning away until finally, Elsa sat forward, swung her leg over, and dismounted. They left the horses standing untethered at the tree line as they walked out into the open glade.

The opening was more fully a meadow than a glade, perhaps five acres in all. The sun’s direct exposure raised a rich mixture of scents, of pinesap and sage and dry flinty earth. The center of the clearing rose like

distension from the bowels of the earth. It was slight, but unmistakable. As they moved toward the center, the ground became more uneven, rockier, with stony fissure-like wounds opening underfoot.

“Watch your step,” Elijah cautioned. Bunch grass gave way to thickets of sage, and Elsa gathered her riding pants—more skirt than pants except for the inseam that divided the legs—to keep from catching on clawed branches of twisted sage. They walked single file, Elsa matching Elijah step for step.

The fissures grew into tortured, bowled depressions, yawning crevasses, and finally, a series of sunken caves. The spot was an ancient lava protrusion, a distant rent to the main thrust of activity that had aligned the peaked chain of summits forming the spine of the Cascades. Elijah stopped and stared into the largest cavern in the center of the clearing.

“Many, many years ago, this was a sacred place,” Elijah said softly. “Still is,” he said solemnly. He turned and the two looked at one another without barriers, without embarrassment. “Nobody comes here anymore. Nobody but me.”

“Who came here—before?” Elsa asked quietly.

“The ones my people call the Ancient Ones. From long ago. It was back when the animals spoke a language we could still understand. Even still, the Ancient Ones knew that they were different. They were not like the animals.”

“Who are your people?” Elsa asked directly.

“I am Modoc. But I am sure it was not Modoc who came here. This is not Modoc country. The Klamath live to the south. The Warm Springs to the north. The Modoc were made to live with the Klamath when we lost our land, but we once had caves like these. Ours were places of great power. Like these. I could feel it the first time I came here.”

Elsa stepped closer to the edge of the opening. In the midday light, the slant of her shadow was thrown into the mouth of the cavern, framed in the oval ring of light on the floor of the cave. She stood and stared at the relief of her presence, trying to picture what Elijah spoke of. She looked up, letting her eyes sweep the surrounding landscape then circle slowly and fall on Elijah, to hold the gaze of his startling gray eyes.

“Why did you bring me here?” she asked in a soft yet direct voice with nothing to hide.

Elijah studied her. “It was not a decision,” he answered. “I was led, much as you.”

Elsa held his gaze for a long moment, then turned away. She spied a rocky bench of stone and stepped over to it to sit down. She closed her eyes and turned her face to the sun and drew a long, deep breath of dry air.

“I like it here,” she said, her face still turned to the sunlight, her eyes closed. “I like it a lot.” She opened her eyes and raised her hand to shield the glare as she peered at Elijah. “May I ask you a question?” she said.

“One can always ask,” he replied, squatting, changing the angle to reduce the glare. He reached down and ran his dark hand over the earth, scooping up a small handful of the dusty, parched soil. He held it with one hand as he idly drew the index finger of his other hand through the mixture.

“Are you always so reticent with people?”

He looked to consider her. “Reticent?” he asked, not understanding the word.

“Reserved. Withholding.”

Elijah smiled. “Reticent,” he said thoughtfully, as if to absorb the halting sound of the word, imprinting its meaning. “A good word,” he said finally, dropping his gaze. He continued to draw his finger through the dirt in his hand.

“And?” Elsa said after a long pause.

He smiled. He nodded. “Reticent. A good thing for an Indian.”

“In the company of whites, you mean.”

“Yes,” he said evenly.

“In the company of a white *woman*,” she added.

He stared at her. He drew a breath. “Yes. Reticent. A good thing.”

“Are you reticent with your wife?”

Elijah narrowed his eyes and appraised her more intently, his eyes fixed on hers. He drew another breath and straightened, letting the dirt sift slowly through his fingers.

“Come,” he commanded. He stepped forward and down into the opening of the cavern in front of them. He picked his way slowly, pausing to look back, making sure Elsa was coming. He extended his hand. She rose and stepped forward and took his hand. He held it firmly, providing balance, not tenderness. Step by step they worked their way down into the belly of the cavern. Even in the sunlight Elsa could feel the cool drop in temperature from the lingering shadow at the edges of the shaft. Elijah led her across the broken, rocky floor of the cavern, out of the sunlight, back into the shadows.

“Close your eyes,” Elijah commanded.

Elsa looked at him questioningly. He let go of her hand. “Close your eyes,” he said again, more playfully. Elsa took his measure, then closed her eyes. She drew in two nervous breaths, then sighed, then drew a full, deep breath of air. Elijah stood less than an arm’s length away, admiring the exquisite mystery of this woman.

“Open your eyes now,” he said softly after an incalculable time. He watched as her eyes fluttered open, her gaze adjusting to the dimness. He watched as her eyes roamed slowly over the surface of the cavern’s dimly illuminated walls.

“*Oh my*,” she whispered breathlessly. She turned and looked at him with a penetrating gaze, then turned to study the walls again.

All about them, wherever there was a smooth surface, was a multitude of handprints. Handprints outlined and painted in muted patinas of earth colors. Dozens—scores—perhaps a hundred in all. Elsa stood and stared, taking them all in, speechless.

Elijah watched as she stepped forward as though propelled by a force not her own. He watched as she raised her hands and fitted them into a pair of prints on the wall. In the dim twilight, he saw a shudder pass across her shoulders and down her arms, into her hands. It was like she had discharged the spark of life, a part of herself, into the dark stone—that, or perhaps responded to a discharge from the stone that had imparted the binding power

of timeless time, burning its memory into the core of who she was, who she had been.

She stood with her hands pressed to the wall for several long moments. “*Incredible*,” she whispered, her eyes closed, leaning into the imprint of hands that held her. Slowly, she let her hands separate from the rock face and let them fall back at her sides. She turned and caught Elijah studying her.

Elijah stepped past her, making his way to leave. The cavern seemed infused with a spirit he had never felt before, dark and electrifying at the same time. Unnerving. As if against the pull of an undertow, he began to ascend the crude staircase of tumbled stone, climbing up from the hold of the earth, reaching for the light.

Rising out of the dark, standing at the lip of the cave in the bright sunlight, he looked down, watching her as she started to ascend. Nervous, he turned and scanned the clearing. Something felt auspicious and threatening at once. Looking down again, he saw her start to stumble, reach to catch her balance, then stagger-step quickly to regain her footing. It was in that instant he saw the snake. The timber rattler struck with blinding speed before he could cry a warning.

Elijah sprang into the cave as Elsa lost her balance and began to fall. He caught her hand and pulled her to him, catching her in his embrace as he stumble-stepped down the broken stone staircase to the cavern floor. Once on steady legs, he gathered her up into his arms and turned to look for the snake. Like a vapor, it was gone. He inspected the whole face of the rock steps, and only when he was sure that it had retreated, he carried her out of the cave and laid her on the ground, her back against a large stone, the length of her washed in light.

“Are you okay?” he asked, leaning back to take in the full sight of her. Elsa’s face was drained of color, except for a small scrape on her left cheek. “Where did he bite you?” he asked, trying to sound calm. He saw her glance vacantly at her leg, saw the small puncture marks in the dark pleating of her outfit, high up on her thigh. He took his knife and cut the material so he could inspect the wound. The twin punctures were small, precise. The raised ventings were stark, red beads against the pale flesh.

He studied the bite, then studied Elsa’s face. A bit of color had returned to her cheeks. “You okay?” he asked again.

“Yes,” she said soundlessly. He was surprised at her composure.

“We need to get back. But first I need to get the poison out.” He expected her to protest, but she merely stared at him. “It might hurt. I need to make small cuts to help the bleeding.” She continued to hold his gaze without emotion. “Look away,” he commanded.

Elijah flicked the razor edge of his knife over the punctures, causing blood to rise and pool, then spill over the creamy flank of her thigh. He folded and put his knife away. He started to bend to the wounds, then paused, reluctant, realizing what he was about to do. He looked up. Elsa was studying him again.

Slowly, deliberately, maintaining his gaze on the steady light of her dark eyes, he lowered his mouth toward her wounds. At the last moment, he

paused, unsure, then turned his eyes to the tender flesh of her thigh and pressed his mouth firmly over the flowering points of blood.