

## *Chapter One*

### *The Cabin*

The blind seer sat alone in the belly of the mountain, staring at his hands. He raised a wineskin to his lips and warmed his throat with bitter consolation. When he was younger he had often looked at the bony, high-veined hands of old men and old women, and he had been surprised to learn that the sight of such things didn't hurt other children. When he had seen aging hands and failing bodies, anguish had seized him—like a fist crushing his young heart. Why, he would agonize, does what is good and beautiful have to decay, become ugly, and die? In his youth he had never been free of the pain of longing for life to be right—as it should be. But now he was different. Now as he looked at his own aging hands, he felt nothing. The anguish had left him long ago. What remained was a numb, disinterested knowledge that without the pain and the questions, he had ceased to be a seer. He was blind. At last he had become what well-intentioned friends had always urged him to be. Now, finally, he could look at the aging hands and decaying soul of a young dreamer without asking questions, without feeling any pain at all.

The people didn't know, of course. They knew that as a young man he had plagued his elders with questions about good and evil and that finally he had gone away to distant peoples and returned with exotic stories and songs that made him the most learned man of his tribe. They loved and respected him. He was their seer, and in the dangers that had recently engulfed them, they relied on him

more than ever. How could they see, how could they even suspect that his soul could no longer endure the pain, and he had put the boy's exhausted eyes to sleep? Day after day the people turned to the seer for vision, never guessing that he could no longer see. And day after day the weary man reached into his store of visions too long unseen and sustained the people he loved with stale stories and songs he no longer believed.

He reached unsteadily for the wineskin and felt a dull regret for the loss of his vision—the death of his soul. With the last of the wine he swallowed the beginnings of a sob. For just a moment the thought had come to him that life should at least provide funerals for the children we used to be. Life owed that much to the boy he had once been. The man he had become should be able to say a few kind words in memory of the youth he would never see again. The seer whose eyes had closed forever should be able to say that the boy had dared to look on the world with the big brown eyes of a child—that as long as the boy had lived, he had trusted the ultimate goodness of the world as unreservedly as a child trusts the goodness of his father. There would be no funeral, though. The boy was dead, but no one would honor him or mark his passing. No one even recognized that he had died—no one, that is, but the old seer.

The wineskin slipped from the old man's hand, and he slumped to the floor of the cave, longing with his latest thoughts for the morning, when the children would come and crawl onto his aging knees and ask if God would really remember and help them. The faintest of smiles came to his weary face as he groaned and pulled a heavy skin over his shoulders and thought how he would make the little ones laugh tomorrow. The old seer slept as dreamless as the dead, and the mountain groaned that night.

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Far away in Portland the warm winds of late spring blew insistently from the lonely slopes of the Cascades. The Mountain was

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summoning her Boy. For days the winds persisted. Night after night they moaned outside Rob's window, but sunk in deep and bitter sleep, the boy could not hear them. One night, though, in the early hours just before dawn they rattled his windows and would not be still, and finally his sleep was shaken. He rose and opened the window and sucked the warm mountain air deep into his lungs. He had to go. He was sick of school, sick of the city, sick of his parents. Truth to tell, he was just plain sick. He loaded his backpack and fishing gear. When he went down to breakfast and told his parents that he was going to the mountains, there was an argument, but that was not unusual. In the end he got his way, which was also not unusual. By noon he and his friend Pete were in the Jeep, heading for the Cabin. The winds ceased that afternoon.

They parked at the end of an old logging road and slept that night beside the Jeep. In the morning they shouldered their packs and started up. The Cabin was concealed in a small valley at the 4500-foot level. They reached it that afternoon after an eight-and-a-half mile hike. Rob's grandfather had built the Cabin, and Rob's family spent a couple of weeks there most summers. Rob could remember trout rising in the pools of the streams and in the beaver ponds, rising to a fly just as the chill of morning fled before the sun's warmth. The trout and the quiet and the sun. And the flies—his, and his dad's, cast carefully into the small pools. That had been good, and the joy of those times was lurking in the depths of his mind, almost forgotten, calling him. This time his father was not with him, and Rob was glad of it.

The bolt slid out of the latch. The door creaked open, revealing only shadows. Rob unbarred the shutters, and the late-afternoon light revealed the interior of the Cabin, which consisted of a single room with a couple of bunked cots, a table and bench, a rocking chair, and a small wood stove. Three years of dust covered everything.

After a few minutes of exploring cabinets and stretching out on the dusty cots, the boys swept the place, started a fire, and broke out some grub. They enjoyed steak and potatoes that first night, luxurious fare compared to the rice and beans they'd eat the rest of the trip if the fish weren't biting.

They opened a bottle of bourbon and filled two of the round-bottomed tin cups that had been in the Cabin time out of mind. They talked for hours—harsh, cynical talk carefully cultivated the last couple of years to prove that they were no longer kids. The bottle sank to near empty. The lantern grew dim. They stumbled into bed about midnight, and the Mountain grieved—not because of their boisterousness. She had seen many a party of happy men who ended the evening in their cups, and she understood. But tonight she grieved. For the boy had heard her call, and he had come, but with what wounds! Nearly all his boyish joy had bled out of him, and what little was left he was ashamed of. He slept, and she kept watch over him, brooding, anxiously preparing surprises for him in the morning.

Long after sunrise, when the boys felt well enough, they walked down the slope to the beaver ponds. They began to fish the upper one, silently surveying it for the dimpled signs of feeding trout, working their fly rods silently, skillfully. They were fishing opposite ends of the pool, which was full of native cutthroat trout, undisturbed for years.

Pete picked up the first strike, at the lower end right next to the dam. He took the twelve-incher off the hook, held it up with great enthusiasm and made a ridiculous attempt to yell to the other end of the pond in a whisper the secret of his success. "Royal coachman! Royal coachman!" Rob understood the shouted whisper by lip-reading and was about to change his own preference, an unpretentious woolly worm, for the elegant Coachman, when a trout burst from the water and grabbed his worm. The boys did not notice how much like kids they looked, grinning in triumph and further

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anticipation, drinking up simple joy like water from a clear mountain stream. The Mountain watched, and the sky shone brilliant blue. They cooked up the fish and ate them with piles of fried potatoes, reliving each strike.

After lunch Rob said, "There used to be a mink pond about a mile from here. There's still enough daylight if you want to go."

"Do you think they're still there?" asked Pete.

"They'll be there," he said, drawing certainty from almost a decade of memories.

"So, let's go. I've never seen minks. Just watch, I'll probably trip and scare them away."

"Don't worry, we'll see them," Rob assured him, and they set out, carefully leaving the dirty dishes right where they lay.

They walked silently over the trail, made through those trees by centuries of deer and carpeted with pine needles. Up the ravine they walked, along the ridge, over into a small hollow on the North slope. Rob fell to his knees. Pete knelt beside him. Their faces almost touched as Rob whispered, "It's about fifty yards ahead. We'll have to crawl through that underbrush. Good thing the wind's blowing this way. There are two small rises between us and the pond. When we get to the second one, just slide your eyes over it. They'll be below and to the left."

They were Indians, silent, aware of every breath, every motion as their binocular eyes slipped over the rise at a gap in the undergrowth. At first the glint of the setting sun kept them from seeing. Then they saw the minks on the near bank, still visible in the waning light. For the next thirty minutes the boys filled their hearts with the gleaming fur, fishing skills, and youthful jubilation of the mother mink and her litter of six young pups. Finally, aware their daylight was running out, they slipped back to the ridge top, where they fell into one of those disjointed, breathlessly whispered dialogues that can't really be called discussions, that served no purpose but as a vent for their excitement and as proof that

they had indeed been a part of something extraordinary and full of wonder.

“Did you see the big one grab that fish?”

“Yeah, I never knew they could move like that.”

“And the teeth! Did you see the teeth in them?”

“And the little ones were so flipped-out—just like a bunch of hyperactive four-year-olds.”

“I’ll bet their fur would be warm, but it would sure take a lot of ‘em to make a coat.”

“I wonder if anybody ever traps up here.”

“My grandpa used to, but I don’t think anybody does anymore.”

So it went, even as they took clean dishes from the cupboard and filled their plates with more of the morning’s trout. The Mountain never promises, but she does call, and sometimes she gives rich gifts.

That night there were checker games, more whiskey, and talk of girls. Pete claimed a particular attraction to the stuck-up ones. It was the sport—the challenge of smiling or looking sad or offended at just the right time, of ignoring in just the right way, of finding just the right lines. Luring her, hooking her, playing her. And finally landing her. Pete was good at seduction. He had caught a lot of girls.

There was something about seduction that Rob didn’t like—something about the pretending. What he wanted was honest, mutual consent, without any illusions or promises. He wanted girls who saw him as a fun time and whom he saw in the same way: a little harmless pleasure, no strings attached, no promises for the future, no deception.

They continued late into the night with accounts of their conquests, real and fictive, claiming the conquests as joy, denying the sense of letdown, the vague regrets. Consciously or unconsciously they chose to batter the bashful joy of childhood which had unexpectedly returned to them as they caught fish and watched

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minks. It fled, and the posturing that had supplanted it in recent years returned.

They began the next day just as they had the previous one, and found themselves standing expectantly at the beaver pond, anticipating full stringers in an hour. But after fifteen minutes, when neither had gotten a single strike, the day began to take on its own character. Their excitement turned to frustration. They gave up fishing in disgust and turned to making lunch: rice and beans. That, in place of the fresh fried trout they had expected, did little to raise their spirits. It rained all afternoon, but that didn't really matter. Somehow the thought of going to see the minks or exploring some other part of the Mountain didn't seem so alluring today.

The drizzle continued two more days, and even the hollow fun gave way to boredom and grumbling. Saturday was dismal; they decided to leave Sunday. Neither of them was truly sad to see the trip over. It had been a disappointment. For some reason it had fallen flat—except for the first day with the fishing and the minks. They turned in early Saturday night, soon after the last drop of bourbon was drained. Rob wondered if he would ever bother to return. The Cabin wasn't the same place it used to be. It had lost its magic.