

## CHAPTER ONE

*... all shiny and soft like fur . . . it was fur. He put fur all around me so that it stroked my soft skin and hid my black hair. Then Katie was angry. I said Katie don't be so angry . . . but it was all to no use, and she thundered away behind the mountains, behind the fire, and they went in and out of me all night, me in the deep fur, and Katie angry because I liked it, in fur and all eider soft with down . . .*

*The Woman's Notes, December?*

*The Professor's Journal:*

She was ragged in the firelight but flushed with heat and not bad looking. About her rosy cheeks lay skin as white as birch bark under black-night hair so thick, luxurious—her smell so rich, like myrrh or sandalwood. The trees reared up to see her and us together in the branches and brambles.

None of the men could understand what she was saying, but they all answered her just the same. "Yes, Ma'am," they said. "Don't you know?" They all saw her well enough with their heavy, misty eyes as she sat there hunched over, shivering, repeating the same syllables over and over. Then

some of the men got up from where they were sitting in the cold, sprawled branches and had a dirty go at her, pulling off her rags and making her pretty legs flash in the dark. When they had finished, in a soft creaking of the earth, they mewed like cats or sniffed or sang to themselves like babies in bedrolls sprinkled with snow.

She sat upright again. A sprig of holly tumbled from her hair, and she started jabbering the peculiar syllables over and over, just the way she had done before.

After a while the fire burned low, the great logs of cedar reduced to ash and ember, and the tiny bower filled with shadows and the hoots of owls. Still, starlight thrust its way in shafts through the thick canopy of leaves. I gentled her loveliness with my eyes, the silky skin and tiny breasts. Someone had roughly cut her—Ivan the Cossack, perhaps, who yowled his frantic need for her, or the theorist, Livingston, in his wire-rimmed specs hung with snow. She was bleeding heavily. There were cuts on her shoulders and her back, and in the winking light it looked like someone had taken a clumsy razor to her throat.

"Can't you shut up?" complained the blonde cowboy, Curtis, shooting a long flannel arm from his bedroll and throwing a boot at her head, his blue eyes flashing.

"Shut up, woman!" said the hunchbacked Morgan, sitting by the fire in partial shadow by the fire and searching a frosted pack for his hunting knife. "I'm going to kill you if you don't shut up."

"Sleep or die!" said Curtis, hoisting himself into a seated position. "What's it gonna be?" He pushed back the wet, wide brim of his studded hat from the long, long curls of his angel hair.

"Touch her and die!" I said, keeping an eye on Curtis until he lay back down.

The woman was talking gibberish, saliva running from her chin, but I was beginning to understand some of what she was saying. Her name was Katie, I guessed, because she kept saying, "Katie, Katie, Katie," and pointing to her breasts, her eyes wide and feral.

"Just go on and talk," I said, inching up close and feeling her shivering.

"I can't," she said, turning her powder blue face toward the smoke and letting a ripped shawl slip from her shoulders.

"You're naked," I said, wrapping the both of us in my horse blanket and heating her with my body. She was quiet for a while, and then the

snow began to fall again heavily, covering the rough carpet of twigs and old pine shredders. The horses ceased stirring in the copse of blue gum. They stood thickly, their heads toward the ground; and the men, asleep, curled up and twisted in soggy blankets like squirming caterpillars in wet cocoons.

Invaded by the big flakes, the fire sputtered and hissed. Just to be inside her, I went softly into the woman for the length of a thumb and didn't move.

She moaned and wept and put her arms around me. Pretty soon, she started talking again, sometimes in nonsense syllables, sometimes in intelligible English; and after a while, when the blue of her face receded and pink took its place, the snowy wind calmed and I was able to figure out that she'd been to Detroit recently and that there wasn't much reason for us to be going there. I rocked inside her.

"They're all dead," she said, her fingernails digging into my shoulders. "Just like everyone else, and the water smells like sewers."

I shuddered and lay upon her quietly in the dark.

"Rubble and torn engines and lights fractured like bones of the body all smashed and littering the pavement."

"Books?" I said. "How about books? Libraries? Were they destroyed?"

"All heaps and smokes and pages blowing into the dark night," she said, "and fire in balls rolling down the pavement."

"All destroyed?" I shouted.

She laughed for a while in a thin whine like keening, then started talking gibberish again while I pumped inside her. Something about her husband as crazy.

"Listen," I said, pulling out and gripping her neck. "There's no one wants to hear anything about your husband. Make sense or they'll cut you. They'll cut your tongue out if you don't make sense soon."

She cried for awhile, and I lay there almost in the fire and watched the snow pile up on the horses' heads, and now and then heard a shudder and the stamping of a hoof. Some of the men were riding in their sleep: there was the youngest, fresh-faced, pretty Herbie; and the most ancient, old Clarence; wrinkling and yellowing like parchment in a crypt; the spectacled Fred Livingston, the smartest and the sickest of himself. All of them were moving under the blankets, their hips rocking gently. But then, sleeping more soundly in the shadows and blackness and quieter under the piling snow were Morgan the dwarf; the Ivan the Cossack; the

skinny homosexuals, Reagan and Phillips, wrapped around one another; the cowboy Curtis; Waverly the fool, and Pgeon, the Indian. In the middle of the night, a beaver slapped his tail on the icy surface of the river.

The Indian, Pgeon, whose white name was Eulander, woke suddenly and sat up in a rush in his striped blanket. He looked gloomily at the riding men, their shining rifles, beside them, spitting firelight, and brushed the snow from his face and long braided hair with a half blackened hand.

"The owl calls my name," he said.

"Shut up," I said.

"The hell with you, Professor!" he said, the black circles around his eyes widening the two caverns of his skull. "This is the land of the dead, walking. All night long the dead say things to me. They are uncomfortable and despise you. They say to ignore your ugliness."

"We should have built a shelter this afternoon," I said.

"No."

"You heard the wind from the mountain."

"What we hear doesn't matter," said Pgeon.

"Something insists I talk," I said.

"Flowers open their petals to the snow," Pgeon said, his eyes staring.

"What do you think flowers matter?" I said. "What do they matter?"

"What matters then?"

"A shelter might have mattered."

"If we had built a shelter, there would have been no snow," Pgeon said, blankly. He turned his naked face upward and stared into the deepened black sky, its heaviness gathering. "A waste of an hour or two or more."

"A waste," I said. "Perhaps."

It was true. I knew it. I felt a flash of anger. If there had been a shelter, there would have been no snow, no owls with white wings or ravens calling. Without the dulled hyacinths and roses blooming vaguely in clusters, there would have been no winter, no cold wind with icy fingers like the long blue branching fingers of the dead creatures Pgeon liked to imagine.

"And if we had built a shelter while it was snowing," Pgeon said, "the snow flakes would have grinned at us and turned around and fallen upward toward the clouds. This the ghosts tell me, and they do not joke."

"What ghosts?"

"The Indian ghosts, the dead that talk. Little children in eagle feathers...with their owls' beaks and hollow eyes and their dead mothers

and fathers . . . all shaking gourds in treetops." Pgeon pointed upward. "The dead roost there."

"These dead of yours are jokes," I said. "What do they know? I hear them in the treetops laughing like goons, and there you are . . . listening."

"Shut up," Pgeon said.

"These dead of yours, what language do they speak?"

"Human being."

"Sioux?" I said.

"Yes, they speak human being," said Pgeon. "Now, I'm going to sleep."

"Too cold to sleep," I said, blood thawing in my nose and running to my lip. "These dead of yours are morons and idiots. They've gone insane."

"Weasel," said Pgeon.

"What?" I said.

"Weasel," Pgeon said. "The dead speak Weasel when they're not speaking Sioux."

"Damn them," I said. It was too cold to talk Weasel. I wrapped the woman and myself as tightly as I could in my heavy blankets.

"Keep quiet!" I said, and for a long time lay there with the woman with part of my fist shoved gently into her mouth.

Some days ago we'd had tents with zippered screens and little red and blue vinyl caps, but now they had been stolen by the rocks that crept around at night. The woman kept on bleeding and crying, bleeding and crying. Or maybe the wet stuff in the blankets was my blood, not hers. Who knows or cares? The woman persisted, bleeding and crying.

Falling asleep, I saw again storm clouds gather and spread like black hands over the face of the afternoon sky. Pgeon was listening to his long, cruel knife, holding its flat blade against his ear and swearing that it wasn't going to snow.

What gods talked to him? Or lied to him? Or laughed at our tossing and turning? I squirmed and cried out, then woke in a fever. Earlier that day Pgeon had seen an eagle soar straight into the sky with a squealing rodent in his talons, and later he had seen the green spirit of a badger sputtering and bleeding by the river—all of which had signaled that the night would be clear and cold.

Should I dispute him? He swore he was grandson of a shaman who could make the snow fall upward and the birds chirrup in Comanche.

The woman was babbling quietly.

Suddenly, crawling in from the black night, there was the half-naked Pgeon on all fours, his bony pharmacist face hovering above us. His voice was a whisper from a well, and the leaden air quivered around me.

"She'll live, damn it," he said. "She's a witch. I knew she was going to come. I had the smell of her, come riding in the air. I smelled her coming. Didn't I, Herbie?"

In the darkness and falling snow, somewhere behind me in the leaves, fourteen-year-old Herbie poked his pretty shaved head.

"You said a witch would come," said Herbie. "Might not have been this one though . . . you were talking about. Might have been an ugly old bitch coming that you smelled."

"Might have been this one," said Pgeon.

Turning, I saw the firelight shining on Herbie's head. I put my hand over the woman's mouth. She struggled a little, moaned, and then fell quiet.

"I saw Crazy Horse last night," said Pgeon, now tucked back in his blankets and speaking so softly that he seemed to be talking to himself. "It was twilight in my dream or just a bit after. There was a voice from the sky; and there he was, coming over the mountains on a cloud, and he was trying to talk to me, trying to tell me something. I remember his face, the face of a dead man . . . as white as yours, Professor . . . and he had yellow hair, like Curtis' hair."

"A dream," I said. "Just a dream."

"No! not a dream," said Pgeon angrily, turning over to face away from me abruptly.

"A vision then."

"Yes, a vision."

I took my hand away from the woman's mouth and eased her with whispers until both she and Pgeon were asleep. The horses tethered at their posts were becoming white with snow and, from my position in the blankets on the ground, looked like shaggy behemoths, now and then shifting slightly to adjust to the vagaries of the gentle wind. Little showers of snow were swirling away from our campfire and falling softly on the thick ice of the lake. I could hear Pgeon and one or two of the other men snoring.

In the snow it was easy to imagine the woman who slept beside me getting up slowly and melting into the darkness. Already the memories of her arriving at our campfire only hours before were beginning to fade, as if her coming to us had occurred in the deep past.

She had come begging scraps of food, half-naked, with a wild look about her eyes and her speech in lunatic fragments. Sleeping beside me, she no longer looked hungry, though she hadn't been fed. I went into her again. She squirmed a little, not waking.

Then the night sounds began—the hum of crickets where there were no crickets, the sound of birds singing where there should have been no singing, no birds; in the distance, the voices of larger animals calling to one another rode the night wind and echoed in the hollows of valleys passed days before.

I held her trembling body to me as close as I could and looked beyond her hair to where the other men lie sleeping. Not even the Indian was awake. I felt the mingled noises of the night creep into my head. The horses were stirring, not accustomed to the noises, as were the men.

"Witch, witch, witch, witch," something said. The owl was hooting, his voice now vaguely human, and I heard the nightly thrashing in the bushes around us. There was no use struggling up to see what it was; it would persist all evening, snow or no snow.

It hadn't been that way before the war, when towns and cities and mountains and trees could be counted on to stay in one place, when geography was something of a science and men could be reasonably certain that twenty-four hours or so would pass in one day.

There was no use remembering, no help in that. I slowly closed my eyes and let sleep steal near and throw its engulfing cloak around me.