Chapter 2 — The Canyon

I love waking up in my uncle’s house. They always give me the room at the end of the hallway. I sleep in the bed against the right-hand wall. There is one on the other side of the room, but I never sleep in it.

I keep the window open a crack for fresh air in the night. There’s a bird singing outside, and that’s what wakens me. It’s one of those quiet Walla Walla mornings, sun just stirring the town from slumber, soft rays of light filtering through the birch trees lining the parking in front of the house. I can see them outside the window, their white trunks like sentinels guarding my dreams.

My Uncle Fred is a CPA. He manages estates for the rich ranchers and does taxes for the business men that are the elite in Walla Walla. I’ve heard that he never misplaced one dime in his work, nor has he ever done a dishonest or even questionable accounting trick to help his clients. My uncle is Finnish, his family came to America at the turn of the twentieth century, and he has old world values.

I never hear him really swear except once. A client calls him and asks him to do something shady. Not illegal, but questionable. I hear it from the other room, her voice tinny and whining on the phone. He is quiet while she talks, then he shouts into the phone.

“Dammit, Ginger, you got a hell of a nerve asking me to do that. Find yourself another CPA.” Only he didn’t just say, “dammit.” The phone slams down. He walks into the kitchen, pours a half tumbler of vodka from a bottle in the cupboard and downs it in three gulps. The phone rings again. It’s her, a disconnected voice on the other end. I can hear the desperation. She begs him to take her back. I can almost see her groveling on her knees. He shows mercy, but not without a caveat. “If you ever ask me to do anything even slightly shady ever again, we are done, and I mean it.” She thanks him. “Yes, Fred” and “Thank you, Fred,” over and over. He hangs up.

My uncle is ruthlessly honest, a dry sense of humor, not a romantic. He’s also a deacon at the Episcopal Church. On Sundays he carries the golden offering plate up to the altar. He never tells me he loves me—not in words, anyway. I just know by the way he teaches me, includes me in his life, makes things happen for me.

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We take off around five in the morning, just my uncle and me. We leave the house on Clinton Street, my aunt still asleep in the bedroom off the kitchen. He’s driving his light blue Chevy Nomad station wagon. It’s his pride and joy. The Pflueger rods, also my uncle’s pride and joy, are stashed in the back with the waders, the red tackle bag with the Pflueger Medalist reels and the blue cooler. We’re headed for the canyon.

Down the road to Milton-Freewater, across the state line, not a lot of traffic. A few wheat trucks rumble by—it’s July, harvest time, and the town has come alive. All the teachers at the local schools are off for the summer, driving wheat trucks in the fields or forklifts at the elevators and the canneries. Walla Walla is farm country and wheat is the lifeblood.

Midway between Milton and Athena is the Tollgate turnoff. A big swinging left turn, and up the hill. When we get to the top, the entire valley spreads out like a chessboard, tan expanses of ripe wheat rolling away to the North and West. The heads of the wheat bow down, waiting for the grinding John Deere harvesters to bring them in—believers gathered to their savior, who comes with a scythe and a fan in his hand.

Off in the haze the dormant volcanoes—Adams, Jefferson, St. Helens—march north, their perfect cones a reminder that fire and smoke can hide just beneath the surface of all beauty.

Up into the Blue Mountains, the road winding between tall stands of pine crammed together, shoulder to shoulder, Braddock’s soldiers marching into the French trap. Past Tollgate, Spout Springs, Langdon Lake, and down the hill to Elgin. We come into town past the logging mill with stacks of huge pine logs piled up, sprinklers on top keeping them wet so they won’t split before they get sawed into boards. The rusty teepee burner belches smoke through the screened top, burning the sawdust and waste. The smell of the pine touches everything in Elgin; the people live because of the smell of the pine.

Turn left at the stop sign, but you don’t have to wait if nobody’s coming, jog right, past the little gas station then the long hill up to the top and start down the Minam Grade. My uncle says back in the thirties it took all day to get down this hill, but now the Nomad screams around the corners and we hit bottom going eighty. “Nothing wrong with speed if you control it.” My uncle grins, his gold bridgework glinting. The little town of Minam, the yellow highway sign that says “Rattlesnake Crossing” and shows snakes on the road. The Minam River flows into the Wallowa here, and we cross the long bridge and head south down the canyon.

Below us the river winds through the trees, disappears, reappears, the surface cracked diamonds in the sun as the road hums against the tires. We come to the pullout. Around the corner, the sagging wooden bridge spans the river. The old house sits above, staring down the canyon toward the mountains as it has every day I’ve fished here.

Waders, fishing vests, the Pflueger rods and reels, creel—make sure I have the round red tin of Mucilin and my net, we’re good. One last check for the small box of Niemi Specials. Yellow, like a hornet, with a black head, red thread and buck-tail-brown wings, it’s the only fly we use. My uncle heads upstream, I go down. “See you later,” he says. He’s not afraid to leave me alone on the river, and I lift my thirteen-year-old shoulders to look taller.

I edge down the bank into the river, silent and green, not too high. Across, on the far bank, the bushes crowd over, almost touch the surface. The hills lift above the trees, some bare, the red rock outcroppings splashes of blood against the brown grass. A dippy bird on a rock, up and down, then plunging in after a caddis. The railroad follows the river across the way. If you can get across, you can walk clear back to La Grande on the tracks.

First cast into the flat in front of the bushes. A small trout rises, looks at the fly as it bobs by then flashes away. Again, closer to the bank. This time a bigger one rushes out and snaps the fly up. Away with a rush, the rod bending a bit, but not a two pounder. I lift the tip and he hits the end of the line. A flash of silver in the sunlight and then he’s coming, fighting against the clicking of the reel, the green line bringing him inexorably in. I dip him out with the net and wade against the pull of the water, back to the bank.

He’s flipping in the net, the fly a deadly boutonniere on his jutting lower jaw. Small, nine inches maybe, but a keeper. I wet my hand and take him, a quick blow against a rock and he is still in my hand, one more to make sure.

I unhook the fly. It’s matted with blood and mucus, so I smear it with Mucilin and blow on it to fluff the wings. The sun is up over the rim of the canyon now. I wonder if death will take us all like that, the hand of God reaching down and cracking our back against a rock. But this is not a death day, it’s life and nothing but the river, and the sun on the water like a thousand candles and the warm air moving in the trees and the voice of the river speaks to my soul.

My wader has a leak and I can feel the slow coolness of the water as it creeps into the boot. I move down the river casting, the fly arcing over my head, following where the pole points. Don’t stay too long in one place, if they don’t take it in the first few casts they are not interested.

Hours fly by unnoticed. It’s just me, the river, the cool water, the sun on my back, the fish in my creel. The sun moves west, now it’s dipping behind the canyon wall. Have we been here all day?

Above me on the road, a blue Suburban rolls by. The horn honks. It’s my aunt, heading for the cabin at the head of the lake. Time to go. Wade across the river and climb out. My foot makes a squishing noise as I walk back down the road. Around the corner, there’s the car, my uncle already stripping off his waders.

“Get any?”

I show him the five trout in my creel. He grins. “Good, good.”

I sit on the tailgate and pull my waders off. The water pours out.

“Leak, huh? I’ll fix it tonight.” Another patch on the waders, like a badge of honor. I shiver in the cool dusk. My uncle reaches in his red bag and pulls out a silver flask. He grins again. “Blue Mountain Mule Kick. This will warm you up.” And it is, and it does.

We follow the road. The canyon lets us go, the valley opens ahead, the mountains rising from the green fields, the snow touching the tops. But behind me, the canyon is always there, waiting, speaking to me in a voice that only those who love the river will ever hear.