

Prologue—Madeline

I am a daughter with no father. I'm someone who always had the river instead. It led me everywhere: into the belly of rock canyons, up cool mountains, onto beaches with bear and cougar prints pressed into wet sand. Between seasons on any river, I'd always come back to Mom's house in southern Oregon. In our own backyard, we had the steep steelhead runs of the north coast, the skinny deep canyons full of rain-fed rivers. How Mom could stay off them, I never knew. But she worked all the time, just minding her organic garden and holding vigil for my dad. If not for me, Mom might never have gone boating again after Dad left.

No way I could stay off the water. The river is my life. Wouldn't matter who I'd lost or been waiting for forever, I'd still have to get to the river. Out there is a life worth living. Days aren't measured by hours, but by the time between sunrise and the climbing of the moon. Water flows from every hidden grotto with the sweetest music; sunsets swirl brighter than the wildest wildfire. Thick forests stack up on the ridges, where the trees edge with gold at sunset mirrored off the river flowing jade green. Up in the

dappled trees, cicadas clack by day, owls call by night—then go silent as you follow them into the woods. And the willows: so many different willows. Like it isn't enough to have a lime-green feathery kind, there's also a sage-gray stalky one, and a silvery leafy one, and a dark-green spikey one.

All the creativity out there always made me hopeful. A world so generous had to be able to bring back my dad. I wasn't wrong to think so. Like I wasn't wrong to figure anyone who could capture my Mom's heart had to be something. She didn't go around falling for just anyone. I always said if I could find a man like that, I'd put him on my triptik. But I'd never give up the river. It's out there to live and die for, so beautiful you know there's a river god, and she's as clever as she is great.

By the time I left home for Utah, I'd boated Oregon commercially every summer for years. I'd taken hundreds—no, thousands—of passengers down the Rogue. The runs had grown predictable, I admit, every riffle and rapid reduced to formula. I knew what would happen if I stayed home—I'd sleepwalk through everything. I'd start bouncing around the rock gardens and get sideways in waves. I owed myself a change, and I owed it to the people. So I signed up for the desert, as different a place from my green Oregon as I figured I'd find anywhere in the world.

Going south to Utah in May, I wasn't prepared for the cold. I thought there'd be warmth down there, but on that first spring training trip, I about freeze-dried in the sharp, ice-filled wind. Michael and Joanie, two guides I'd met only days before, took turns with me rowing downstream. Even in wetsuits, we shivered between our times at the oars. We'd each row ten minutes and switch, blowing on our hands and working our fingers to keep the blood moving in them. If we came around a bend in the river that opened to a view of the nearby mountains, with a drape of snow fallen the night before, I'd try not to look. It was pristine, gorgeous, and a bleak reminder of the cold.

Each time my turn came to row, I did three things. One, I pushed downstream in the way I'd learned from running steep, narrow rivers. Michael and Joanie rowed with their backs downstream, but not me. I pointed the bow the direction we were going and headed that way. Everything was new, the Green full of waves that plunged toward rocks I couldn't see through the mud in the river. Dangers lurked beneath the rumpled surface—sometimes I could only guess whether a hump meant a smooth flushing wave or nasty keeper hole. I kept my eyes forward to find out. Second, I listened to everything Michael and Joanie told me so I could interpret it back to the passengers who would show up in two weeks for our first commercial trip. There was a lot to know about the seventy-five river miles between the put-in at Deerlodge Park and the take-out at Split Mountain, both just inside the borders of Dinosaur National Monument. I could learn it on the training trip or know nothing when the people came and asked a million questions. And the third thing I've already said: I kept the oars moving constantly to stay warm.

So it went all three days of our spring training run. It was my first time down the Yampa, which pours out of the Colorado mountains and into the Green. The river loops back on itself around big meanders, cutting thin rocky ridges between its curves. Black tiger stripes reach from top to bottom on blond walls—they're unreal looking, as if someone took a massive brush and painted them on. In thunderstorms, waterfalls plunge down those stripes from the canyon rims all the way to the water. More beautiful places are hard to find.

We were getting by tolerably well dealing with the cold for the first ten miles when we heard a roar up ahead. Michael was at the oars, pulling stern first down the river. Joanie and I sat in the bow, shivering and huffing on our hands, and we sat up to listen. "Big Joe Rapids," Michael said, between deep breaths. "Should be . . . easy . . . at this level. In two weeks, though, with the warmer weather . . . and more snowmelt, watch out

. . . it gets big and high.” In my opinion, Big Joe sounded massive enough right then. It didn’t crash; it rumbled. “It’s a real . . . noisemaker,” said Michael, with confidence. “Don’t worry.”

I was worried. Not so much about the difficulty of the rapids, but about the cold. Whitewater of any size tends to drench the front end of rafts: Joanie and I were surely in for it. Unless . . . Michael still had his back to the rapids. There was a chance he’d run it in reverse, taking the bow through last and missing the major splashing.

The current picked up, drawing us faster toward Big Joe. Michael glanced over his shoulder. He stopped rowing long enough to study the route downstream. There was that moment of stillness, seconds in which he waited to take aim. When he turned back to us, his eyes showed plenty of white. “Hang on!” he said. “I’m going to spin it!” With a deft yank on one oar and push on the other, he spun the boat one-eighty. My head swiveled as the bow took its usual position up front. Now Joanie and I sat poised at the lip of the rapids, and what lay ahead didn’t look all that easy. It was a roiling mess of waves and holes—brown with Utah mud, wet with fresh snowmelt.

We took the first drop, sharp enough I’d call it a hole. Our raft jerked down, nose first, into the trough. A curler soaked the bow.

“Sorry!” Michael said.

“You bastard!” I cried. Joanie screamed worse, though we both knew he couldn’t have kept us dry. Then, in spite of our miserable chill, we laughed and shrieked for fun. Up and down we rode, into the depths of the waves and back up on crests. It was the kind of thrill people pay good money for, and it was more fun than roller coasters ever thought of being.

Both evenings during training we lit campfires to stay warm, starting with cottonwood shavings and fueled by driftwood that steamed on the flames before it caught fire. We told stories by the coals until they burned to red embers and we were

warm enough to make it through the night in our sleeping bags. I slept without a tent, tucked into my down bag fluffed like a bird in a winter storm.

On the third day, we floated out onto the farm and pasture land of the Green River valley. Emerald patches of irrigated hay checkered the russet skin of the desert floor. We rowed past take-out and continued by river toward our warehouse and trailer down by the Junction bridge. It turned into a longer haul than we could've guessed, with the water moving slower on that wide, flat floodplain. It was still cold, with a new challenge: deep mud lined the shores of the river, making stopping for breaks impossible. We tried for a pit stop only once. Michael jumped from the front tube holding the bowline; the mud swallowed him up to his thighs. It took Joanie and me pulling from the bow of the raft to drag him out by his arms. Even so the mud sucked off one of his wetsuit booties and barely let him go.

That mud is what led us to Chris Sorensen. A wide bar of it had trapped a cow looking for a drink of Green River water. The beast had sunk to all four shoulders so just its torso, neck, and head showed. It stayed stuck, lowing pitifully.

"It'll take a helicopter to get her out," Michael said, as we floated closer.

"Or a big tractor," said Joanie, who'd grown up on a farm near Sacramento.

"Poor thing. Let's stop somewhere and go for help."

Around the next meander, a dirt road came down to the water, ending in a ramp. There didn't seem to be a lot of mud there. For once, instead of pushing, I turned my back to shore and pulled, humming "Volga Boatman" along with Michael and Joanie. After a moment, I noticed they'd stopped humming with me. I turned on the rowing seat to see what had silenced them.

Where there'd been an empty ramp, there now sat a man on horseback: one arm across his horse's neck, the other angled up from a hand on his thigh. He might have been from another time: felt cowboy hat, bandanna, jeans, boots, plaid wool jacket. A

little black-and-white dog trotted out of the willows and down to the water. I stopped rowing. The man on horseback waved. Michael and Joanie waved back. I pulled on the oars again. As we neared shore, I could tell who it was: Chris Sorensen, one of the few people I'd met so far in Junction.

"Afternoon," he said. "Seen any cows along the river?"

"Just one, Chris," I replied. "Upstream of the last bend."

"Oh, hey! Didn't see that was you."

"Hey," I said back.

A smile brightened his face. "Which side of the river was she on? The cow, I mean."

"West," said Michael and Joanie, together. They pointed toward the ramp as if to say, *your side*. Chris waved a thank you, touched his hat to me, and turned and headed out the dirt road. The dog stared at us a little longer, then followed him out.

"The Cowboy?" Joanie asked.

I nodded. My heartbeat thrummed in my ears. Michael and Joanie knew I'd run into Chris, but they didn't know there was already an injured thing between us. I myself didn't have a clue about some bigger injuries and the pain to come: the exploratory rigs criss-crossing his valley; his brother sending letters from halfway around the world. My breath felt trapped in my chest. No sign from Chris would serve me right after leaving him standing by the side of the road, holding the bag, so to speak.

The river wanted to move me away—the raft turned a notch on an axis aligned with my head and hips. A grove of tamarisk threatened to cut off my view of the ramp and the retreating figures of man, horse and dog. The nose of the raft swung to point downstream and—he gave a signal. Just a shift in the saddle, an arm raised chest high, and a thumb pointed to the sky.

There was hope, after all.