

THE MODOC WELL

PROLOGUE: VACATION, AUGUST 1992

California's Lassen County had much in common with the barren surface of some rogue asteroid hurtling through space.

It offered none of the Golden State's happy tourist places that people flocked to all through the summer. For the Lowell family it seemed a bleak, dusty anticlimax to the week preceding their drive up U.S. Highway 395. Towns with names like Doyle and Milford and Buntingville passed with invisible speed. Before all the chaparral and rocks it had been Lake Tahoe, the gold country, the wine country, and Jack London Park. And Bodega Bay, where Hitchcock had directed *The Birds* and where they still dug for horseneck clams on the mud flats.

But that day, for a couple of hours, the prehistoric stillness of Lassen County surrounded them.

The Lowells, Greg and Janet, and their teens, Mark and Allison, had not planned this vacation. A month earlier, it had been nothing. Vacation plans for that year were to fly east at Christmas and visit Janet's family in Pennsylvania.

But on a particular Sunday in July, Greg and Janet knew they couldn't wait that long.

Traffic inched along the San Diego Freeway near Mulholland Drive. Janet and Greg, trying to get home to Van Nuys from a day at the South Coast Plaza shopping mall in Orange County, had traveled three miles in the last forty minutes. A stage one smog alert was in effect in the Los Angeles basin; temperatures hovered in the mid-nineties. Turn your air conditioning off, roll down your window, breathe it in. Or leave the air conditioning on and overheat, like dozens of cars along the shoulder.

"Great choice," Greg muttered.

"What'd you say?" Janet asked.

"Nothing. Just thinking with my mouth."

She looked at him. "You've seemed a little out of it all day. Maybe these seventy-hour work weeks are finally getting to you."

A dented Honda cut into the few feet of space between Greg's Camaro and the car in front of them. Greg braked three inches short of the Honda's rear bumper.

"It's not just today," he said. "I don't know what's bugging me lately. Just...*things*. Guess I shouldn't complain. Work is going well—although Jeremy Hunter's fourth novel is going to be late and I'm getting some flak over that. Forgot to tell you."

Janet nodded. Greg served as executive editor at Sabre Press, a small but successful publishing house in L.A. Years earlier, he'd "discovered" Jeremy Hunter. Now, after three best-selling novels—all set during California's Gold Rush era—Hunter had proven to be a gold mine himself, one that Sabre Press depended upon heavily.

"We have the kids," Greg went on, "and the house. But...hell, I don't know."

Janet indicated the stifling freeway. "*This* could do it to anyone. And you have to deal with it every day."

"Maybe." He glanced at her. "I wish we could get away from it for a week or two."

"A vacation." She nodded. "I was hoping you'd ask. Okay."

"Just like that? What about December?"

"We'll go. The hospital will let me work extra shifts. Even if I couldn't, I'd rather cancel December and do something with you and the kids now."

Greg leaned over to kiss her, ruffling her short dark hair. “Thanks. The day just got better.”

Allison Lowell, fifteen, thought a vacation sounded like a great idea. She had always been Greg and Janet’s “baby,” but that wasn’t going to last much longer. Although Allison described herself as plain, Janet knew she was changing. The photos of Janet as a teenager could easily be mistaken for Allison. And Janet, at thirty-nine, was considered a fox, even by Mark’s friends.

Mark Lowell, nearly seventeen, appeared less excited. The tall boy, an ardent athlete, had inherited his father’s dark complexion and rugged features. A starting linebacker for Van Nuys Central High, he’d already begun informal scrimmages for next season. Only the lure of Bodega Bay—Mark loved horror movies—won him over.

Two weeks later they left Shanty, their terrier, with Robert Lowell, Greg’s father, and started up Highway 101 in Janet’s LTD station wagon.

At Susanville, the largest town in Lassen County, they picked up State Highway 139, which skirted the Lassen National Forest. It was a slower route, but more direct for Greg’s destination.

“How far is Bonner from here, Dad?” Mark asked from the back seat, momentarily looking up from his new *Sports Illustrated*.

“An hour and a half, something like that,” Greg said.

“I’m hungry,” Allison said.

“We’ll be there by lunchtime.”

“Are you assuming Bonner has a restaurant?” Janet asked wryly.

“*You* should talk, coming from Oil City, Pennsylvania.”

“*Touché*. What will you do there, seek out old haunts?”

“Old haunts? I was born in Bonner, but I was only a few months old when we left. Didn’t I ever tell you that?”

“I guess not. Why did your folks leave?”

“I’m not really sure. Tough place to make a living, I suppose. Dad wasn’t exactly the farming type. And they had only been there a short time. Sold a piece of land that belonged to my mother’s family. Crazy Ben Padgett’s old ranch.”

“*Crazy* Ben Padgett?” Mark repeated.

“My great-grandfather.”

“But why *crazy* Ben?” Allison asked.

“Ah, a sudden interest in our family skeletons.” Greg smiled. “Okay, I’ll tell you the unpleasant early history of the Padgetts...later. During lunch, maybe.”

“Aw, Dad!”

They drove through Lassen County for the better part of an hour. Greg concentrated on the often twisting road as well as the music pouring from the speakers. It had been his turn to choose the tape: Beethoven’s *Choral Fantasia*. The full orchestra had just joined the solo piano, which had laid a sonata-like foundation for the piece. The quiet entry of the strings belied the thunder that would soon follow.

Ahead, they saw a road sign: ENTERING MODOC COUNTY.

Allison and Mark, debating some issue in the back seat, heard nothing. Janet, gazing at the stark volcanic tableland outside, was only half-sure her husband had spoken. Soon she forgot it, for what she thought she’d heard made no sense.

There would have been no reason for Greg to say, “Almost home.”

PART ONE:
THE DIGGING

CHAPTER ONE: THE SETTLERS

By 1856, the first settlers had already come to the land of the Modoc Indians. Not to the forbidding lava beds farther north, but to the surrounding valleys covered with rippling meadow grass for their herds, where lakes and streams were choked with fish, and juniper woodland and mountainous pine forests were overrun with pronghorn antelope and black-tailed deer.

Elias Kolb and his family became the first of the indomitable pioneers to settle in a particular mountain valley, one that stretched from the base of green rolling hillocks to the facings of taller peaks. *Sayka loluk*, the Modocs called it. Fire Valley, in the white man's tongue.

David and Amanda Trimble, a young Ohio couple, followed. Next, Edwin and Kate Leary and their children; Calvin and Edna Hoyt and their only daughter.

Jason Bonner came, too, but with different expectations. The gambler and entrepreneur, who had won and lost fortunes from the paddlewheelers of the Mississippi to the mining camps of California, saw the potential of the area. He built a hotel and saloon just south of the valley. A mercantile store, blacksmith-livery, gun shop, and others followed. Soon, the cluster of stores became a town, which despite his protests bore the name of its charismatic founder.

They came to stay, the white people. The hated *basdin*, as the Modoc Indians called them, came to rule in their beautiful *sayka loluk*. They brought their guns, and their diseases. Yet by the time Fire Valley was settled the Modoc fought little, and no longer for his birthright, but for survival.

Five months after the first wall of Jason Bonner's Harmony House hotel went up, a small wagon train of Oregon-bound settlers set off north from Susanville. At its head rode Amos Ezekiel Paine, a scarred mountain of a man in his forties. Paine proclaimed himself a wagonmaster, cavalry scout, and bounty hunter of Indian scalps. The latter was in keeping with his avowed hatred of the red man.

On the second day of the journey, the party followed a rugged trail across a broad plain of chaparral. Paine, fifty yards ahead, suddenly motioned for the train to stop. He lifted his head, sniffed the air then urged his horse back toward the settlers.

Wallace Padgett sat on the bench of a sturdy Conestoga wagon between Rebecca, his wife, and Martha, their twelve-year-old daughter. He watched Paine's approach with disgust. Neither he nor the other emigrants cared for Amos Paine, who had quickly established himself as a distasteful traveling companion.

"Something wrong, Mr. Paine?" the New Englander called.

"Not sure yet," was the gruff reply. "There's injins out there, but I don't know how many or what they're up to. I kin guess, though." He pointed past the rear of the train at a small straggling herd of cattle.

"How can you be sure Indians are nearby, Mr. Paine?" Rebecca Padgett asked. "Did you see any?"

"Don't have to see 'em, lady. I kin *smell* the stinkin' red devils. They smell worse'n cow shit."

"What do you want us to do?" Wallace Padgett asked.

"I'm goin' on ahead. You tell the wagons to tighten up. Make sure your brats keep the cows closer."

"My *sons* have been doing just fine," Padgett said coldly as he climbed down.

"Father, can I go with you?" Martha asked.

"Of course, dear."

Padgett helped her down, and they walked back to the next wagon. Paine watched them for a moment then turned his lewd gaze toward Rebecca, who was busy with the reins as she shifted over on the seat. She was a striking, shapely woman. He knew what her prim high-necked dress and matronly bonnet concealed. He had sworn that on the journey to Oregon he would have her—one way or the other.

"Havin' trouble, lady?" he asked.

Rebecca glared at him. "I'll manage fine. You'd best go about your business."

“When I’m ready,” he growled, and despite her defiance, Rebecca seemed afraid. “What’s with you, lady? That scarecrow Padgett ain’t no man. I bet you never had a *real* man before.”

“Mr. Paine, if you don’t get away from me—”

“Hey, what’s that?” Paine suddenly exclaimed.

He drew his Colt.45 as a red streak flew out of the chaparral twenty yards ahead. Rebecca glimpsed a naked Indian boy, perhaps eight or nine years old, about the same age as her own Benjamin. Paine didn’t hesitate. The boy’s flight was stopped by a bullet in his head. He toppled forward, dead before he struck the dirt. Paine fired three more shots, all on the mark.

Rebecca leaped down from her wagon and calmed her startled team, then ran to the little corpse. “*Murderer!*” she cried back at Paine. “He was just a child!”

Paine holstered his weapon indignantly. “He was an injin.”

“What happened?” Wallace Padgett exclaimed as he and others appeared. “Oh God! Martha, get in the wagon!”

The girl obeyed as Padgett knelt by his trembling wife. Together they stared at Amos Paine, who sneered and said, “You folks make me sick, comin’ west with your notions of right ‘n’ wrong. This ain’t a human, it’s *vermin*.”

“As my wife said, Mr. Paine,” Padgett replied, “you are a murderer. Let’s get some shovels. We’ll bury the boy.”

“The hell you will!” Paine bellowed. “Faster we get away, the better. And you’ll be doin’ the injins wrong by buryin’ it. They cremate their dead. Now leave it there and let’s go!”

The other settlers turned to the Padgetts. The Torgesons, the Archers and the Hewitts all respected the strong-willed couple who dared defy the seething wagonmaster.

“Let us at least hide his body in the brush,” Rebecca said. “The children shouldn’t have to look at this.”

“Make it quick,” Paine grumbled, and urged his horse ahead.

Padgett dragged the corpse into the chaparral; Rebecca and Torgeson covered the streaks of blood with dirt. They set off again quickly, but none could leave behind the image of what they had witnessed.

There was no retaliation. But Paine, who had drunk too much, was the only one who slept that night. And the next day, his head throbbing, he was relentless in his tongue-lashing of the weary emigrants.

“What a detestable creature,” Wallace Padgett muttered to his wife.

“To think that we have to endure this all the way to Oregon...” Rebecca shuddered.

“What choice do we have?”

A few days later, the Padgetts found that they did have a choice: the *sayka loluk*. From the rough trail that led through a range of low mountains, they gazed across Fire Valley. They saw the Trimbles’ rippling fields of barley and wheat; the combined herds of the Learys and the Kolbs grazing on ankle-deep bunch grass; the mountain streams crisscrossing the valley floor.

The Padgetts stayed. After learning land was available, after experiencing the hospitality of those who’d already settled the valley, Wallace Padgett paid off Amos Paine. They said good-bye to the Torgesons, the Archers and the Hewitts, all of whom chose to continue to the promised land of Oregon.

Wallace and Rebecca Padgett, their daughter Martha, their sons James and Benjamin, had arrived, the last players in the drama that would come to be known as the Fire Valley Massacre.