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Torn between two worlds, a young Indian boy returns
to his ancestral ways, alone, in the wilderness. . . .

WHEN THE LEGENDS DIE



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HAL BORLAND

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He came home in midafternoon, hurrying through the alley. She was sitting on the back step of the unpainted two-room house, peeling willow twigs with her teeth and watching the boy chase butterflies among the tall horseweeds. She looked up and saw her man come in from the alley, through the horseweeds toward her. His face was bloody, his shirt torn and bloody down the front. She clapped a hand to her mouth to stifle the cry of hurt and surprise, and he stepped past her, into the house. She followed him and he gestured her to silence and whispered, in the Ute tongue, "They will come after me. Bring water to wash. Get the other shirt."

She went outside, filled the tin wash basin from the water pail on the bench beside the door, and brought it to him. She got the other shirt while he washed his face. There was a cut over his left eye and a darkening bruise beside his mouth. He washed his face, then his hands, and gave her the pan of red-stained water. She took it outside and poured it on the ground among the weeds, where it sank into the dry soil and left only a dark, wet spot. When she went inside again he had taken off the torn shirt and wrapped it into a tight bundle with the bloody places hidden. He pulled the clean shirt over his head, tucked the tails inside his brown corduroys and said, still in the Ute tongue, "I shall go to the stream with black-stem ferns on Horse Mountain. Come to me there." He went into the other room and came back with the rifle. He tucked the bundled shirt under his arm and went to the door, looked, waited, then touched her face with his free hand and went outside. He hurried through the weeds and down the alley to the place where the scrub oak brush grew

close by. He went into the brush, toward the river. The magpies screamed for a moment, then were silent. He was gone.

She wiped the water from the table where he had spilled it, searched the floor for spots of blood, and wiped the tin basin with the rag. She went outside and put the basin beside the water pail and looked at the place where she had emptied the basin after he washed. The wet spot on the ground was almost gone. She came back and sat on the step again.

The boy, who was five years old and only an inch or so taller than the horseweeds, came and stood at her knee, asking questions with his eyes. She smiled at him. "Nothing happened," she told him. "Nobody came. Nothing happened. Remember, if they ask." He nodded. She handed him a willow twig. He peeled the bark with his teeth, as she had done, chewed the bark for a moment, tasting the green bitterness, and spat it out. "Go catch a grasshopper," she said, and he went back among the weeds.

She waited half an hour. Then they came, up the street and around the house. They came and stood in front of her, the tall man who always came when there was trouble, the short, fat one from the sawmill, and Blue Elk, with his squeaky shoes, his black coat and derby hat, his wool-bound braids, his air of importance. She looked up at them, each in turn, and she clapped her hand to her mouth and began to wail. "You bring trouble!" she cried. Then, to Blue Elk, in the Ute tongue, "My man is hurt?"

The tall man, the sheriff, watched her and said to Blue Elk, "See what she knows."

Blue Elk rubbed his hands together. They were the soft hands of a man who has not worked in a long time. He said, "Bessie! Stop the wailing. The wailing is for another woman. Let her make the mourning."

"My man is not hurt?"

"You know he is not hurt. Where have you hidden him?" They both spoke Ute.

"He is not here. Why do you come here for him?"

"He was here. He came here."

"If you know this, then find him." She gestured toward the house.

"What does she say?" the sheriff asked.

"She says he is not here. She says we should look."

The sheriff and the sawmill man went inside. She sat waiting. She asked Blue Elk, "Why do you want my man? What happened?"

"He killed a man."

"Who?"

"Frank No Deer."

"That one." Scorn was in her eyes.

"I know. Frank was a thief, a no-good. But George killed him. Where did George go?"

She shrugged.

The sheriff and the sawmill man came back. "No sign of him. What does she say now?"

Blue Elk shrugged. "Nothing."

The sheriff and the sawmill man talked in low tones. Blue Elk turned to her again. "Where is the boy?"

She glanced about the weed patch before her eyes met Blue Elk's. She waved her hand vaguely. "Boys play, go where they will."

"They will watch you," Blue Elk said, still in the tongue.

"If they want me, I am here."


The Sheriff turned to Blue Elk. "Tell her we'll find him if we have to run down every little bunch of Utes in the mountains, every fishing and berry camp. If he was here, he covered his tracks. Or she did. Tell her we'll find him."

Blue Elk said to her, "You heard. For the cost of two horses I could settle this."

"I have not the cost of two horses."

"One horse," Blue Elk offered.

She shook her head. "I have not the cost of one goat."



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When his father kills another Indian, Thomas Black Bull and his parents seek refuge in the wilderness. There they take up life as it was in the old days, hunting and fishing, battling for survival. But an accident claims the father's life, and the grieving mother dies shortly afterward. Left alone, the Indian boy vows never to return to the white man's world, to the alien laws that condemned his father.

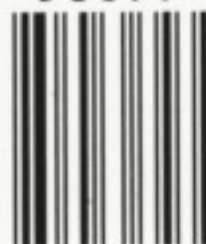
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