

Prologue

*Never while anything is left of me shall this place be forgotten.
It has fairly grown into me, not merely as memory pictures,
but as part and parcel of mind and body alike.*

—John Muir

Colby Muir Collins counted himself blessed to be one of the few, aside from the native Miwok people, to be birthed in the Yosemite Valley.

His arrival in the world, like all primal things, bore the unmistakable imprint of the Divine. During the millenniums of its creation, the Yosemite was sculpted by glacial ice grinding and polishing the granite of the uplifted Sierras. The raw power and beauty of the Yosemite forged Colby's soul as well. He was forever branded by the sheer wildness of his childhood playground in what Yosemite dwellers called the "granite womb." From an early age, Colby felt the sacredness of the towering granite walls, weeping waterfalls, the green rushing water of the Merced, the fragrant white blossoms of the dogwood.

Later, Colby would wonder about the idyll of his childhood days. Was it dream or a godly gift imparted at birth to prepare him for what was to come?

The story of his birth was one told 'round the early campfires of Yosemite, like a tall tale or a bit of Indian lore. Colby's mother, ever the stalwart hiker, became enthralled by the early-morning reflection of Half Dome in the silvered waters of Mirror Lake. Lost in beauty, she ignored the early twinges of labor. When she bent down to touch the velvet pink center of a Mariposa Lily, warm water ran down her legs, pooling a dark stain on river sand. Labor pains came fast and insistent. Unable to manage the walk home to their cabin, she laid down in the sedge grasses of the river bank, giving herself over to the birth pangs that ushered him into the world. Her anguished cry and his baby wail echoed from the cliff face. The wild call of a red-tailed hawk answered.

When his worried father found them at last, the newborn, wrapped in a black and red flannel shirt, was already suckling at his mother's breast. His mother named him "Colby" after his maternal grandfather. His father chose the middle name "Muir" in honor of John Muir, Yosemite's greatest champion and spokesman.

At six months of age, he was baptized into the wilderness life by being bathed in a campfire-warmed bucket of water dipped from the Lyle Fork of the Tuolumne River.

"Like Muir," his father proclaimed at his bucket baptism, "you'll one day speak for these mountains, and they in turn will always speak to you."

Colby's baby book held the pressed flower of a Mariposa Lily, a wing feather from a red-tailed hawk and a quote that held his father's dreams for him:

*I went to the woods
because I wished to live deliberately,
to front only the essential facts of life,
and see if I could not learn what it had to teach,*

and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*