

*Part Two*

*"I'm going up to Lou's a minute to get some cigarettes," Daddy had said. "You look after your brother till I get back." Mama had gone with Aunt Margaret to buy canning jars in Seneca, leaving Ben and me with Daddy, telling him to watch us and the pot of beans she'd left simmering on the stove. But Daddy needed his cigarettes, so he left us there in the front room, Ben on the floor playing with a toy train and me in a chair doing math homework. After a few minutes Ben said, "I'm hungry," and got up while I added a last column of figures and wrote down the answer. Only a few seconds passed before I followed him into the kitchen, but Ben's hand was already on the handle, his arm trembling as he pulled the two-gallon pot of beans off the eye, my arm reaching out for the handle but too late as scalding water and beans poured*

onto Ben's face and my left arm and leg. For a few moments I didn't know the water had scalded me as well, because it was like I'd cast every sense and emotion out of myself and across the two-foot space between Ben and me, done this because sight alone wasn't enough to comprehend what had happened to my brother. How could it be otherwise when only the eyes Ben had closed at the last instant were saved.

Neither of us screamed. Ben just whimpered and then not even that while I didn't make a sound because it was like watching a movie, no more real than that because Ben's ruined face couldn't be real. The room tilted and a wave of blackness rushed in. When the floor leveled again and the room lightened, Ben and I were holding on to each other in the kitchen corner, as if the beans spilled on the floor could still hurt us. Ben's pain was dimmed by shock, but my arm and leg now burned as though I was on fire, a fire that spread to cover my whole body, invisible flames that never quit burning. "The wicked are their own wick" was how Reverend Tilson described hell the morning he lit a candle in church and had us pass it around as he preached. That was exactly what I felt, what I saw when I closed my eyes—a candlewick inside an unquenchable flame. If older or in less pain I might have been able to clear my head enough to telephone Uncle Mark or Billy's parents. But that was beyond me. All I could do was watch the clock on the stove, because the red second hand proved that time still moved and that meant Daddy had to come back and Ben and I wouldn't be huddled in that corner forever. But it was forever. Daddy had been talking with Lou Henson and forgotten about us being alone. I counted out loud each time

the second hand passed the twelve, telling myself that before the hand reached that twelve again Daddy would be back. I had reached twenty-seven before I heard Daddy's truck.

"What kind of mess have you made, girl?" Daddy said, when he saw the spilled beans and Ben and me huddled in the corner. Saying those words to me as he stared at the beans and the pot, not really seeing us until Ben heard Daddy's voice and turned his face and Daddy saw. Then a few more moments or minutes lost because we were no longer in the house but in the truck and Ben not making a sound, so quiet I believed he was dying. Each time the road curved we slid back and forth across the front seat and the pain leaped up and covered my arm and leg whenever I bumped against Ben or the door. All the while thinking, My brother is dying, and finally saying it out loud, and Daddy saying, "You shush now," and not saying anything else as he jerked the steering wheel with one hand and shifted gears with the other. As we swung through those curves the dropoffs fell away below us for what seemed miles, and I thought between surges of pain that we were going to fall into the sky and never stop falling.

The road finally straightened when we came off the mountain. I looked at Ben and his eyes were barely open, his lashes flickering, and I suddenly knew certain as anything in my life that if he did close his eyes he'd never open them again. "Don't close your eyes, Ben," I said, and his eyes looked back at me but unfocused, like I'd just woken him up. I kept telling him to keep his eyes open even as the hospital orderlies lifted him and me out of the cab and they took him toward one room and me to another, Daddy going with Ben and leaving me alone until Momma got

there. The doctor had my arm and leg bandaged by then and Momma thanked him and took me not home but to the waiting room. "I've got to see how Ben is doing," she told me.

"I want to go too," I said, but Momma just shook her head. Grown-ups I did not know sat in the chairs that lined the walls, dressed as though in a church, and as quiet. Not one of them looked like they wanted to be there. The woman across from me stared at the bandages on my arm. She whispered something to the man next to her and he stared at the bandages as well. They did not smile at me or look sad or sympathetic. They just stared. To be left in this room is part of your punishment, I said to myself.

I rode back with Daddy because Momma was staying with Ben. Once home I walked alone out to the far pasture, my arm gauzed, no blazing pain now, just a low simmer. I looked at the mountains and felt at ten what I would find a word for only years later—claustrophobic. Because it felt as though the mountains had moved closer together since we'd been at the hospital, and would keep on moving closer until they finally suffocated me.

## CHAPTER 6

Under a darkroom safelight everything is gray. Your hands are drained of life. Stop bath settles in your nostrils and stomach like formaldehyde. Maybe that's the way it should be, because what a photograph does is embalm something or someone into a boxed and stilled forever.

A darkroom is a place where your failures come to light: a wrong combination of f-stop and shutter speed, a misjudgment of depth field or right exposure. Or you make new errors. You don't check the temperature of the chemicals; something spills; you turn the white light on too soon.

But sometimes, everything happens just as it should. You rinse the print in the darkroom's gray light, and there in your hands is the photograph you hoped for.

And that is what happened on Monday afternoon when I lifted the five by seven from the print dryer and stepped out of the darkroom with the other pictures worth showing to Lee. I sat down at my desk to study the photograph more closely. Everything was right—light, shutter speed, symmetry.

Wolf Cliff Falls dominated the frame, the backdrop all water and rock. Herb Kowalsky stood slightly to the right. No one else was in the photo. My shot angled upward out of the pool, ending not far above Kowalsky's head. Such a perspective usually makes a person seem larger than life, able to dominate a scene. But in this photograph the angle only emphasized Kowalsky's powerlessness, juxtaposed as he was next to the falls that held his daughter.

Nevertheless, you could make out that Kowalsky was staring into the water, and you could see the index finger raised to brush away a tear that had not existed until this moment.

"Sweet Jesus," Lee said, when I showed him the photograph. "That's the father?"

"Yes."

"Oh, man, this is good, Maggie. This is real good."

Lee went to his door and shouted for Phil.

"Check this out," Lee said, handing the photograph to Phil. "Maggie's kicking your ass."

Phil laid the picture on Lee's desk as though reading an article.

"Hell of a photo," he said. "This is one to nominate for awards, Lee."

"Damn straight," Lee said, nodding his head for emphasis.

"You're telling me nothing I don't know. You'd have to be blind not to see this is a great photo."

He turned to me.

"You shown it to Hemphill yet?"

"No."

"Well, why don't you? Maybe it will inspire him to get his article done. He's got less than a day and I haven't seen word one."

"Okay," I said.

I left Lee and Phil and took the elevator to the second floor.

"Lee thought you might want to see this," I said, handing Allen the photograph.

He stared at it with the same intensity Phil had.

"That's a hell of a picture," he finally said.

"Of course it's just a photograph," I said teasingly. "As someone I know once said, 'There is always something more that lies outside the camera's framed, mechanical truth.'"

Allen grimaced. "Where did you come across that youthful indiscretion?"

"Part of my background check."

"I got a lot of well-deserved grief about that comment," Allen said, looking embarrassed. "A photographer friend e-mailed me a bunch of Susan Sontag quotes. Another guy sent me a book of photos taken by Henri Cartier-Bresson."

"So have we won you over?"

"I don't know. I'm a lot less sure about most things than I once was." He handed the photograph back to me. "But I do know this is a damn good photo."

"It's yours as much as mine. You set it up."

"What I did was like giving a writer a possible topic. What the person does with the material makes it good or not."

I looked around Allen's office. Sparse. The walls bare. A few books on the shelves, mainly style manuals and dictionaries. On his desk the computer, beside it pens and pencils sprouting from a coffee cup. A legal pad and his tape recorder. No photographs.

"It must be nice having this kind of space," I said. "Sometimes my cubicle feels like I'm inside some kid's ant farm."

Allen pointed at the print in my hand. "A few more photographs like that one and Hudson will probably give you *his* office."

"As they say in Oconee County, that's about as likely as a toad growing wings." I glanced at the legal pad. "So how's your article coming?"

"I'm still typing."

"If you don't have time for supper tonight, I understand."

"No," Allen said. "I'm close enough, just two more paragraphs. As a matter of fact, I was going to take a coffee break before I finished up. Why don't you take it with me?"

We rode the elevator to the main lobby and were almost to the door when someone called Allen's name. Thomas Hudson stood at the doorway of his office. He waved Allen over.

"I'll be back in a minute," Allen said.

I walked out into a day that was a sure precursor of what the next four months would be like. Unlike in the mountains, Columbia's air already had a weight to it, a weight made up of equal parts heat and humidity. The first time I'd

gone running after moving downstate I was sweat-soaked and gasping after a half mile. It had felt like I was exercising in a sauna. Ninety-one degrees, the Bank of America sign declared.

I glanced through the glass doors and saw Allen still with Hudson. I crossed Gervais Street. I didn't go into Starbucks but walked three doors down to the Capital Newsstand. I wanted to see if the latest *LensWork* or *Black and White* was in.

When I came back out, Allen was waiting across the street. I waved to get his attention but he didn't see me. He turned to go back inside. I yelled his name and stepped off the curb. A horn blared as a flatbed truck passed close enough that I had to jump back and grab a parking meter so as not to fall. Close. But not so close as to warrant Allen's expression. As I regained my balance, my eyes still on his face, I wondered if Herb Kowalsky had looked much the same as he watched his daughter sweep down the river.

"I'm Okay," I said, but as we sat down with our coffee a few minutes later it was clear Allen wasn't. "Lee would say I wasn't aware traffic could pass in two different directions at once."

Allen did not smile. I put my hand over his.

"Hey, it wasn't as close as it looked."

"It was close enough," Allen said. He shut his eyes for a few moments. When he opened them they looked sad, resigned.

I lifted my coffee cup and drank. Allen's cup remained untouched.

"Hey," I said, smiling but also a little exasperated. "That's all there is to it. I promise I have no Sexton or Plath volumes on my bedside table. I don't listen to Joni Mitchell CDs with my hands full of sleeping pills. I was just coming to get you and was careless."

Allen stared at the table. His free hand lifted the coffee cup from the table as though checking its weight, then placed the cup back without raising it to his lips. He cleared his throat.

"Claire was coming to get me at Dulles when she and Miranda died. The flight had been eighteen hours, and I was tired and irritable. I waited thirty minutes and then called the house, figuring she'd forgotten. The answering machine picked up. I called again fifteen minutes later and left a message this time. I told Claire I was getting a cab. I also told her that if she weren't so damn self-involved she might remember when her husband who'd been gone five weeks was coming home."

I held my hand open between us as if to deflect his words.

"You don't have to tell me this," I said.

"I know," Allen said, "but I think it's better if I do."

"Okay," I said.

"I got my taxi and we headed toward Georgetown. It was raining hard so the ride took longer than usual. On the other side of the parkway it was worse. There'd been a wreck, and traffic was backed up a mile. I remember thinking how glad I was that the wreck was in the southbound lanes. When I got to the apartment, two messages were blinking on the answering machine. The first was mine. The second was the hospital, telling me to call immediately."

"You can't feel bad about things you didn't know," I said. My words sounded so facile I didn't say anything else. For a few moments neither of us spoke.

"Well," Allen finally said. "We better get back to work."

"I'm glad you told me," I said. "I want to know these things."

Allen lifted the coffee to his mouth. It had sat long enough that he could drink deeply. He did not put the cup down until it was empty.

"Let's go," he said.

As we stepped off the curb I held on to his arm.

"What did Hudson want?" I asked.

"Nothing much, really. He just told me he was looking forward to the article about Ruth Kowalsky."

"Must be nice," I said. "Hudson's never acknowledged anything I've ever finished, much less something I'm still working on."

"This is an exception for me as well," Allen said. "He must think this story is going to sell a lot of papers. Hudson's always struck me as a bottom-line kind of guy."

We got in the elevator and Allen pushed floors two and three.

"I look forward to dinner tonight," he said as the doors closed.

"Like I said yesterday, don't expect too much. For me cooking is more about survival than artistry."

Allen smiled. "Don't worry. Whatever you cook and however you cook it, I promise you I've eaten worse. That's one of the realities of spending time in the third world."

"I suppose my culinary skills can rise to at least those expectations."

The elevator shuddered to a stop and I stepped out. As the metal doors shut, I wished the most useless thing in the world—that I'd met Allen Hemphill before Claire Pritchard had.

"I WASN'T SURE WHICH ONE," ALLEN SAID WHEN HE ARRIVED, offering me the bottles of red and white wine he gripped in his right hand. He set a loaf of bread on the counter.

He had shaved and, like me, changed out of his work clothes. He wore brown chinos and a blue flannel shirt that matched his eyes. I suspected he too had spent more time looking in the mirror more attentively than he had in a while.

"Red," I said, taking the bottles from his hand.

"Can I help do anything?"

"No, it's all taken care of, such as it is."

"How about a glass of wine?"

"Sure," I said, and lifted two glasses from the cupboard.

We went into the living room and talked about work while Emmylou Harris sang of love lost and love found. When we finished our wine Allen came to the kitchen as I cooked the pasta, but our conversation was stilted, like two people dancing but unsure of the other's next step.

As we sat down for dinner I was glad I'd loaded the CD player with play five disks. At least the music filled the gaps in the conversation.

"It's not that bad, is it?" I asked, as Allen set down his fork after a few bites. I wasn't sure if I was referring to the whole evening or the food.

"No, it's very good." Allen smiled weakly. "I'm nervous, so nervous I can't eat. It's like I'm back in junior high on my first date. I couldn't eat then either." He paused. "That's what this is, isn't it, a date?"

"C'mon." I stood up and held out my hand, then led him to the couch in the living room.

Unlike our kiss on the bridge, this one lasted a good long time. I lifted my hand to his face and felt hair thicker and wavier than mine. How far do I want this to go, at least for tonight? I wondered. How far does he? Not too far, Allen's hands and lips soon made clear. Tonight at least.

After a few minutes I kicked off my shoes. I leaned my head against Allen's chest, my knees pressing the side of his leg.

"I've been wanting to ask you a question," I said, "but I'm not sure it's something you'll want to answer."

"Go ahead," Allen said. "I've spent most of my life asking people those kinds of questions, so turnabout is fair play."

"Has writing about Ruth Kowalsky been hard for you?"

Allen didn't say anything for a few moments.

"In some ways," he finally said. "It intensifies certain regrets."

"What regrets?" I asked, nuzzling closer, feeling the softness of the flannel on my cheek, the beat of his heart beneath it.

"That for a good portion of my daughter's life I wasn't even



on the same continent. That she lived only nine years, and during that time she had a father who put her second to his career.”

“You couldn’t have known her life would be so short.”

“And I’ll never know if I really would have made Kosovo my last overseas assignment. That’s what I told both her and her mother. I want to believe that’s what I’d have done. But even if I had, that wouldn’t have changed nine years of only seeing her a week out of each month, less than that for the six months I was in Rwanda.”

Allen shifted so he could look at me.

“You know what she told me when she was five?”

“What?”

“That her friends had fathers they saw every day.”

“That must have hurt.”

“Not enough to do anything about it.”

I settled back into Allen’s chest.

“What about your wife. Regrets?”

“Sure, but they’re different. Claire didn’t need me the way Miranda did. Claire was independent. She’d made a life for herself when I wasn’t around. She had her own career and friends. She was an attractive woman. There may have been other men in her life—probably were, those last two years. But I didn’t blame her for that. How could I?”

“And you? Did you have other women?”

“No, though I’m not sure Claire believed that. I put all my energy into the writing. A lot of the other journalists would go out drinking and skirt-chasing, but at night I stayed in my room and wrote.”

“So you were faithful to Claire,” I said. It was the first time I’d spoken her name, and it unsettled me to hear it come from my mouth, almost as if I were afraid the word might invoke her spirit to join us in the room.

“Faithful to her, or maybe just faithful to the writing.”

Lucinda Williams’s voice filled our silence for a few moments. She sang of car wheels on a gravel road, of things left behind but not forgotten.

“That evening after I came back from the hospital, I gathered all my notes for the Kosovo book and threw them in the fireplace. I struck a match and watched them burn. I don’t know why I thought that would make any difference.”

Allen paused.

“But this situation with Ruth Kowalsky, it’s like I’ve been given another chance to be a good father by helping get another man’s daughter out of that river. I didn’t see that at first, when Hudson asked me to do this story, but I see it now. Does that make sense?”

“Yes,” I said, but I was thinking something else, that sometimes you don’t get another chance.

“I used to be arrogant enough to think I could save the world, but I know better now. The best you can do is find a single good cause, no matter how small, and put all your energy into that.”

“Luke says the same thing,” I said. “He says that’s what the Tamasee is for him.”

“Because of what he saw in Biafra?”

“Yes.”

"It was hands-on for him, I guess—people literally dying in his arms."

"Yes," I said. "It was."

"It wasn't that way for me. What I witnessed wasn't something I felt in a personal way. I always seemed somehow removed from it, like there was a partition between me and the victims. I used to try to rationalize that. I'd compare myself to relief workers, or ER doctors back in the United States. Like them I couldn't get emotionally involved. If I did, the suffering would overwhelm me, and what I was doing was too important to allow that to happen. That's what I told myself."

"Maybe it would have overwhelmed you. And what you did was important. People needed to know what was happening there."

The CD ended and the room was quiet except for the ticking of the chestnut mantel clock passed down to my mother from her mother. The day after Momma's funeral I'd taken it from Daddy's room and placed it on my bureau. I hadn't asked and he'd never said a word about my taking it.

"But I was little more than a voyeur. I hadn't earned the right to be 'emotionally detached.' I always arrived after the fact, and even then I wasn't the one lifting those bodies into graves. There was a girl in Kosovo who'd been killed by a land mine. She looked Miranda's age. Same complexion, same color hair. Maybe the same color of eyes if they'd been open. She lay in a potato field. It had rained and the field had been recently harvested. They searched an hour on top of and then under the mud before they found her right foot."

I wanted to say something but Allen raised his index finger as though in admonishment.

"For a few seconds I saw that this girl could be my daughter, that this was the world I lived in. I closed my eyes right there at the field's edge, and, at least for one moment, I didn't believe I could open them again. It was too awful to look at. I understood something else at that moment as well, something I'd witnessed in Cambodia—women who'd seen so many of their family members and friends die in Pol Pot's death camps that they had willed themselves blind."

He blinked as though coming out of a dream.

"And then it was like adjusting the focus on a camera. No, I told myself, this isn't my world. This has nothing to do with my reality. At that moment the partition came back up. I could see then, see the girl's body, the search for the foot. I could see it all, and it could touch me no more than if I were watching a movie."

The mantel clock chimed ten times.

"But that changed when I was in the morgue's basement and placed my hand on Miranda's cheek."

Allen looked at me.

"Do you understand what I mean? I felt death, not just observed it."

I did understand, because I was with Momma when she died. I had been on one side of the bed and Ben on the other. The doctor had seen her that morning and told us she'd live another day or two, but by early evening her breaths shortened to harsh gasps. Daddy called an ambulance and then

called Aunt Margaret. He stayed in the room only until she arrived.

"I can't watch her die," he told her. "I just can't." He waited on the porch till it was over. But Aunt Margaret was there with us, talking to Momma in a soothing voice, her hand brushing Momma's hair. Then Momma exhaled one last time, almost like a sigh. I lifted Momma's wrist to feel her pulse, and her arm felt heavier, as though death gave a body an additional weight to carry.

The blue in Allen's eyes seemed brighter, like the blue you see when long-cured firewood burns. I knew he had never told anyone what he was telling me now.

"Yes," I said. "I understand."

"When I felt Miranda's cheek I realized the Bible is right about us being made of clay, because that was what she felt like—cool, clammy. I lifted her off the morgue table, and as I held her she felt so solid. And every dead body I'd seen in Cambodia and Rwanda and Kosovo suddenly had solidity as well. So does Ruth Kowalsky's."

I listened to time clicking like hooves on pavement. But time isn't something you can rein in. It moves on without pause, taking us with it no matter how much we wish otherwise.

Allen's attention was now on the clock as well. A wry smile flickered on his face.

"I'm so glad we could have such lighthearted fun on our first date. Maybe next time we can read aloud passages from *Blood Meridian*."

"I haven't read that one."

"Classic Cormac McCarthy. In other words, four hundred pages of unrelenting bleakness. It's like falling into a well with no bottom. You keep thinking the book can't get any darker, but it always does."

Allen checked the clock again.

"I need to go," he said.

We kissed, a final lingering kiss, and I walked him to the door.

"This is good," he said, "being with you, I mean. But a little scary, too, like what I'm feeling is happening a little too fast and part of me hasn't caught up yet."

"I know," I said, touching Allen's face with my left hand. "Wherever this is going between us, there's no rush to get there."

I closed the door and started clearing the table. Don't expect too much, I cautioned myself. But I put on another CD, and as I washed the dishes I sang along.

WHEN THE DOCTORS AT THE BURN UNIT IN COLUMBIA HAD done all they could, when all the skin grafts had been completed, it hadn't been enough. The taunts and stares and the nicknames Ben had been given by classmates, the middle school and high school ball games and dances Daddy made him attend, the nights he stayed in his room listening to songs about things he must have believed he'd never experience, all of that he had endured, never acknowledging the pain he felt to Daddy or Momma or me.

Daddy always made it worse. Before every skin graft he

would tell Ben this one was going to make all the difference. When it didn't make much of a difference at all, Daddy would insist it had, though you could see the disappointment in his eyes even as he said it. And still he couldn't keep himself from going into a rage when he'd find Ben in his room nights there was a ball game or dance. You'd think Ben wanted to stay in his room just to spite him, and all the while Momma saying nothing.

And Ben never telling Daddy to go to hell or even saying *no*. When I tried to stand up for him, Ben would say *It's OK, Maggie*, and that made it worse for me.

I remembered the summer days spent in a cave where people once lived in darkness, a place where he could not be seen by anyone, not even himself.

Now my brother was on the phone, his voice crossing two time zones.

"We need to talk about Daddy," Ben said.

"Did he tell you I'd been up there?"

"Yes, but he didn't say a lot except you only stayed one night."

"So he didn't tell you about our little row."

The line was silent for a few moments.

"Can't you just let it go, Maggie?" Ben said, his voice almost a whisper.

"Why just me? He can't let go of things either."

"He's dying," Ben said.

I thought of Ben's hand holding the phone against his ear, his right hand pressed against his scarred cheek. My brother said he was happy now and I believed him, because despite

everything that had happened, happiness and forgiveness were his natural states of being. He had a wife and baby and was finishing up a four-year hitch in the military. More cosmetic surgery had been done once he joined the army, and the scars were less visible. You had to look carefully now to realize he'd been scarred not by acne but by boiling liquid.

"Are you listening to me, Maggie?" Ben asked.

"Yes. But it's not just about him and me. It's about how he treated you."

"He was angry at himself, frustrated he couldn't do anything to make it better for me."

"So if you can't make something better you make it worse."

"We've been over this before. He couldn't help it. I knew that even as a kid, Maggie. I think you did too."

"He could help it," I said. "He could have thought less about his own feelings and more about yours. It was the same with Momma's cancer."

"Sometimes you have to forgive people," Ben said.

"Maybe I'm not like you," I said. "Maybe I'm not as good a person as you are."

"It's not about being good or bad," Ben said. "It's about being afraid of what you'll feel if you can't feel hurt and anger."

"I thought your night classes were in business, little brother, not psychology."

For a few moments we listened to a silence that stretched across a continent.

"So why did you really call?"

"I talked to Dr. Rogers yesterday," Ben said. "He thinks

Daddy will need the most help in the fall. I'll be out of the army at the end of October. I was supposed to take a job here with an insurance company. I talked to them, and they can hold the position until January. Lee Ann will stay here with the baby while I stay with Daddy. But he may live longer than the doctors think or get sicker sooner."

"And if that happens you want me to take care of him."

"Yes. Aunt Margaret's too old to do it by herself."

"And if I don't?"

"He'll be put in the hospital or a nursing home. You know he doesn't want that. He's the same as Momma."

"I can't do it."

"Can't or won't? . . . Well?" Ben asked when I didn't reply.

"It's late here, Ben," I said, "and I have a full day tomorrow. Tell Lee Ann hello for me."

The afternoon Luke had first visited the house, Daddy and I wounded each other as best we could while Momma lay dying in the next room. We'd given voice to every spiteful, hateful thought our hearts had held for each other. Had used up years of them in those few minutes.

Yet our hearts weren't empty. It was as if we had miscalculated how much we could say to each other and still have enough resentment left to cover what lay deepest, what could only be expressed with words of reconciliation and forgiveness—words that acknowledged we were bonded by blood and family and, as much as we might wish otherwise, even love. Words so frightening we sealed our mouths tight, risked not a syllable of that language. Because we both realized once you open your mouth to speak such words you open your

heart too. You open it wide as a barn door and you take off the hinges and then anything could get out or in, and what can be more frightening than that?

Ben had been the same way. All those years he'd never once given voice to the pain he felt, whether it was pain from another skin graft or from a classmate's cruelty. Maybe that was what happened when people grew up in a place where mountains shut them in, kept everything turned inward, buffered them from everything else. How long did it take before that landscape became internalized, was passed down generation to generation like blood type or eye color?

So we spoke only the words we felt comfortable with that Sunday afternoon, and in the days and months that followed as well, until now nine years had passed and any other language had become hopelessly foreign, untranslatable.

## CHAPTER 7

I went straight to the statehouse Tuesday morning to photograph the latest protest against the Confederate flag flying on capitol grounds. When I got back to the office, thirty e-mails awaited me. The first was from Allen, who was in Cheraw. He'd driven there to do a story about a woman who claimed to be Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe's love child.

I was glad he was doing the story. A good dose of southern zaniness offered him a much-needed reprieve from the story he'd just written, the story he would resume on Friday when we returned to Oconee County for the second meeting.

"I'll be back in Columbia by noon Friday, so let's plan on leaving by two o'clock," Allen's e-mail said, "unless this woman suddenly produces the birth certificate for Elvilyn

Presley she claims is hidden in the Memphis courthouse vault. If that happens I may be a little late.”

I clicked to the other messages, most of which congratulated me on the photograph, including one from an editor at the *Charlotte Observer* asking if I'd send a résumé her way. I read the e-mail from lmillar@Tamassee.org last. There was no subject or greeting.

“I expected what Hemphill would do, but you disappoint me. You understand what's at stake up here. Or maybe I should say you once did. A lot of people have devoted a significant part of their lives to saving the Tamassee. You have betrayed every one of those people. It's the only free-flowing river left in this state. Is it too much to ask that ONE river in South Carolina not be turned into a lake or open sewer? Just one, Maggie, ONE river left alone. Is that so *radical*, so *uncompromising*?”

I read the message again. Blunt and to the point, classic Luke. In spite of myself, I smiled, thinking back to the first time I found myself on the receiving end of Lulce's directness. It was the summer after my sophomore year at Clemson. We'd been at Mama Tilson's because Momma hadn't felt up to cooking. Having come straight from my summer job potting plants at Ellis Gillespie's nursery, I'd washed my face and hands in the bathroom, but black dirt was wedged under my nails and stained my T-shirt and jeans.

*That's the troublemaker Harley beat up*, Daddy had said, nodding toward the counter where a man was sitting down. *I'd have thought him to have the sense to tuck tail and leave after a whipping like that*. The man's face was scabbed and bruised.

Stitches stubbled a black crescent on his chin. So that's Luke Miller, I'd thought, because I'd heard about him, not just from Daddy but other people such as Billy, who admired him. He seemed not to care that several people now glared at him, including my father. And that impressed me, his not giving a damn, not being afraid Harley or one of his cronies might be around.

When we finished eating I went to the bathroom while the rest of the family went on outside. As I passed the counter I stopped and told Luke how much I admired his attempts to protect the Tamassee. He'd replied brusquely, telling me admiration didn't do a damn thing for the river, that if I wanted to do something that did matter I should come to the community center tomorrow at ten and help address envelopes.

Billy and a few other locals came that Saturday, as did some middle-aged and elderly people from as far away as Columbia and Atlanta. And of course the river rats, not wearing bright-colored river shorts and polypro shirts and Texas as they would years later but cut-off jeans and tank tops and tennis shoes. The men wore their hair long and attempted beards with varying degrees of success. The women wore their hair long as well. They didn't wear bras and, like the men, were tanned and muscled from long days paddling the river. Luke moved among us, distributing address lists, envelopes, and stamps.

They had all heard what had happened, but it was obvious a number of people inside the community center hadn't seen Luke since Harley Winchester had beaten him up. They

studied his battered face, the way his cracked rib made his breathing shallow and quick, like an animal panting. But what struck me was that, unlike my father, the people who'd gathered that Saturday morning weren't surprised he was there. One of the river rats said aloud what Luke's damaged body proved—that nothing short of being killed would keep Luke from trying to save the Tamassee.

I lifted my eyes from the computer screen. There was no reason to reply to Luke's message. I hit the delete button and closed the program.

I WAS EATING THE GRANOLA BAR THAT WOULD BE MY LUNCH when Lee Ravenel walked over, the front page in his hand. My photograph filled the bottom third right corner, the first six paragraphs of Allen's story on the left. *A father's grief*, the photo caption read. FATHER FIGHTS RIVER AND LAW TO BRING DAUGHTER HOME headlined the article.

Lee folded the paper so it looked like a baton used in a track meet. He held it in his right hand and shook it for emphasis.

"We've already gotten more response on this than anything in months, and I mean anything, even the damn flag controversy. Senator Jenkins's office called this morning. They wanted it made clear the senator would do everything possible to help Kowalsky get his daughter back. Reuters just called too. They're picking this up, photograph and article both."

Lee grinned.

"You're in high cotton, girl."

"Am I?"

"Sure, it's a good bet other places will pick that photo up as well, maybe even a magazine or two."

"I'm not sure how that works. I've never had to worry about it before."

"At the least you'll get a photo credit," Lee said. "Someone like *Newsweek* picks it up you'll get a couple hundred bucks. It could mean a raise too."

"Does this mean I can get that Volvo I've been wanting all my life?"

"Well, if not that, at least a new muffler for your Escort." Lee nodded at the paper. "Hudson's a happy man. He finally got Hemphill to write something of consequence. This is the best thing that could happen for everyone involved."

"I wish I could be sure of that," I said, but Lee didn't hear me. He was already walking back to his office.

DOGWOOD BLOSSOMS NO LONGER BRIGHTENED THE WOODS AS we drove up Stumhouse Mountain. Instead, the oval leaves blended with the surrounding hardwoods. Sarvis bloomed by the road, interspersed with purple and yellow beardtongue and ragwort. A fresh-picked vase of birdfoot violets lay next to one of the crosses.

I yawned, loud enough that Allen looked over at me. I had slept only a few hours the night before. Three A.M. is the hour of doubt, and Luke's e-mail seemed engraved in my mind. Except for our stop at a McDonald's near Greenville, my eyes had been closed most of the trip.



"Sorry to nap the whole way," I said. "I didn't get a lot of sleep last night."

"Me either," Allen said. "Kowalsky called at eleven. Somehow he managed to track me to Aiken. He's already gotten phone calls of support from Senator Jenkins and the governor, and his congressman is flying down from Washington to be at the meeting. Jenkins and the governor are sending some of their staff people to represent them at the meeting as well."

Allen smiled.

"Kowalsky said the piece has made people realize what's really going on up there, but we can't let up the pressure on the other side."

"We?" I asked. "So we're on Kowalsky's side?"

"Those are Kowalsky's words, not mine. I tried to be fair in that article. I didn't demonize Luke or take cheap shots at the search and rescue squad or Forest Service. Is it wrong to show some sympathy for the man?"

For the first time since I'd known him, I heard anger in Allen's voice, anger directed at me.

"No, not at all," I said.

"I'm going up there to cover a story to its conclusion, not to be somebody's mouthpiece. But yes, if I have to choose a side, I'm on Kowalsky's."

"I'm sorry," I said, touching his wrist with my hand. "I wasn't criticizing you."

Allen's voice softened.

"I'm just a little defensive today. Some woman left a message on my answering machine last night. She told me I was

trying to single-handedly destroy the Tamassee River, and the only reason was because I couldn't get past my own daughter's death."

"That was a cruel thing to say."

"But maybe it's true. I said much the same thing to you the other night."

We were near the top of Stumphouse now, nearly 2,500 feet above sea level. In the woods a few dogwood blossoms lingered like stars in a dawn sky.

"I've got one more question for you," I said.

Allen glanced at me warily. "Let's hear it," he said.

"Does Elvilyn take after her dad or her mom?"

"Definitely her mom," Allen said. "She has the same peroxide-blond hair."

"What further proof does anyone need?"

"I agree," Allen said. "Seeing is believing." He freed his wrist from my hand to check his watch. "It's a good thing we made that pit stop to eat. We barely have enough time to check in before heading to the meeting."

We passed the Laurel Mist development sign. The bullet holes in the fawn had been caulked.

"I've got a question for you," Allen said. "Why, if you majored in English, do you use a camera instead of a word processor? I mean, was it an aesthetic or philosophical choice?"

"More a wanting-to-be-employed choice, at least at first," I said. "My first boss said my writing was too florid, that if I was going to imitate a writer it should be Hemingway, not

Faulkner. He had a point. I'd spend three paragraphs describing the inside of the Moose Lodge when he wanted two hundred words on their latest membership drive."

"So you don't necessarily view us wordsmiths as inferior."

"Not at all," I said. "You're the one making judgments in that department."

Allen groaned. "As I've said before, that was a youthful indiscretion. I'll admit right here and now that there have been times when pictures were truer than words. Am I going to have to sign a blood oath to convince you?"

"No, just a specific example."

"The Civil War. You go back and read first-person newspaper accounts, and you'd think they'd been out there playing baseball four years. It's Matthew Brady's photographs that capture what really happened."

"Like the photo of the dead rebel sharpshooter at Gettysburg?"

"Exactly," Allen said.

"That photograph was staged."

"What do you mean?"

"That man died in a field. They moved his body to the sniper's perch. Even the gun doesn't fit. It's an infantryman's rifle, not a sharpshooter's."

"I never knew that," Allen said. "But you could still argue it's true to the horror of war, truer than those 'factual' accounts of correspondents. Brady captured the crucial truth. The soldier was dead, and he'd died young and violently. Brady didn't arrange that."

"And you yourself would buy that argument?"

"Yes," Allen said, as we passed Billy's store. "Wouldn't you?"

"I think so," I said.

THIRTY MINUTES BEFORE THE SECOND PUBLIC HEARING BEGAN, the last chair in the community center had filled. Camera-men from Charlotte and Columbia and Atlanta TV stations staked out the far corners. Three dozen journalists held note pads and tape recorders in their laps and hands, almost as many photographers interspersed among them. A long table had been placed beside the lectern, metal folding chairs behind it. The two placards on the table said WALTER PHILLIPS, DISTRICT RANGER and DANIEL LUCKADOO, STATE SUPERVISOR OF FORESTS.

Phillips was standing off to the side talking to Myra Burrell. Lee hadn't been interested in any shots of Phillips, but I had developed them anyway, then arranged the photos across a desk as though a police line-up. *Will the real Walter Phillips please step forward*, I told the photographs. And one of them, the one with the widest perspective, seemed to.

It was the hands, the way he had balled them into fists, like a man ready and willing to stand and fight if pushed far enough. But how far was far enough? As I watched Phillips talk to Myra Burrell I wondered if tonight I'd find out.

At five minutes to seven, Phillips and Luckadoo sat down behind the placards. Myra Burrell filled the third chair.

The last time I'd seen Daniel Luckadoo had been seven years ago at a Forest Watch ceremony. He was grayer now and near retirement. It was obvious from his demeanor that

Luckadoo wished he was retired right now, was not here but sitting instead on a screened-in porch sipping an after-dinner drink. But before he could get his gold watch and lake house rocking chair he'd have to drive up here to play Solomon.

I turned to Allen. "So how soon after the meeting does Luckadoo make the decision?"

"Kowalsky said tomorrow morning."

"What do you think he'll do?"

"Allow it. He's getting a lot of political pressure to go that way, from the governor on down. Luckadoo has the look of a man who understands the good-old-boy system."

I nodded. Luckadoo had been appointed Supervisor of Forests by a governor who wouldn't have cared if every tree in the state had been cut down. Over the years Luckadoo's actions, especially in regard to clear-cutting, made it evident he shared the governor's philosophy.

Allen nodded toward the front row where Kowalsky sat. Brennon sat on one side of Kowalsky, talking to a man wearing the only suit and tie in the building. On the other side of Kowalsky was a woman I'd never seen before.

"They think it's a done deal. Brennon has already flown the dam down here, as well as the men and materials to put it up. All that does is put more pressure on Luckadoo."

"True," I said, looking over to the corner where Sheriff Cantrell and Hubert McClure stood. "But somebody must have thought this wasn't going to be smooth sailing, else the law wouldn't be here."

I felt a hand on my shoulder, a firm hand.

"Proud of what you've wrought, Maggie?" Luke asked.

"I can't help it that girl is in the river," I said, my voice more defensive than I'd have liked.

"No," Luke said, "but you've given them cause to get her out."

Luke turned away before I could reply.

People leaned against walls and sat in the aisles while others huddled at the door. My photograph had helped fill this room. I watched Luke walk toward the front where Carolyn had saved him a seat.

*I'M STARTING TO THINK MAGGIE IS MORE THAN A DILETTANTE,* Luke had said in this same room eight years earlier. That morning was the fourth Saturday in a row I'd shown up, and Luke's words served as confirmation not only to me but to all the others that I was truly one of them.

It wasn't just my desire to help save the river that had brought me back to the community center each Saturday. Luke Miller was a handsome man, a fact I wasn't alone in noticing. I began to dress like the others, not just the T-shirt and cut-off jeans but the pigtails and face free of makeup. Before Daddy stopped letting me drive the truck I'd take my bra off somewhere between the house and the community center and stuff it in the dash.

The weekend before I went back to Clemson, Luke asked me if I wanted to go canoeing. He knew every current, every depth, every wood snag and rock. He knew where to enter each sluice. The river rats had told me Luke sometimes kayaked the river at night, and I'd assumed they meant clear

nights with a waxing moon and plenty of stars. But as we made our way downstream that last Sunday in August I realized he wouldn't need light. He could navigate the river blind.

We stopped and ate our lunch. After we finished, Luke took my hand and we walked up the bank of Lindsey Creek to where a waterfall spilled into a pool wide and deep as a hay wagon. Luke reached into a gap behind the waterfall and lifted out a battered tin dipper. He filled it with water and drank.

"Aren't you afraid you'll get sick?" I asked.

"No. This water's from three springs, and every one of them is on forest land. It's the purest water in the state." Luke filled the dipper again and held it out to me. "As the poet said, 'Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.' "

I drank water so cold my teeth ached, and then we sat on the bank's plush, cool moss.

"This is my favorite place in the whole watershed," Luke said. "Sometimes I'll spend most of an afternoon here."

"Are you usually alone?" I asked.

"Usually," Luke replied.

He had let go of my hand when we sat down and hadn't reached for it again. He sat with his legs tucked to his chest. I leaned back on my elbows, my left hand palm up and close to his hip. Luke pointed to a shiny-green plant on the other side of the pool.

"You know that one?"

Mountain laurel surrounded the plant, and I thought it might be a sprout. But I didn't want to venture a guess and sound stupid if I were wrong.

"No," I said.

"Oconee Bell," Luke said, taking my hand. "When they built Jocassee Reservoir they destroyed two-thirds of the Oconee Bells in the world. Think about that. In the world."

I moved closer to him. "The ones here should be safe at least," I said, because in mid-August the Tomassee's Wild and Scenic status had been approved by the House. We were careful not to be overconfident so we kept forwarding the petitions and letters, but it looked more and more certain the Senate would vote our way.

My left hand lifted Luke's right. I raised his hand to my mouth and kissed it.

"So are you on the pill?" he asked.

"No," I said, trying not to sound stunned by the question.

"I've got a rubber in my dry pack."

"I don't think," I said, and stopped there. I tried again. "I can't, I haven't."

Luke laughed.

"You surprise me, Maggie Glenn. I figured one of those college boys at Clemson would have talked you into his dorm-room bed by now. One probably has, but you're one of those 'technical virgins,' right?"

I was glad our hands concealed much of my face because I knew it burned red, not so much from the wording as from the comment's truth. It was as if he'd somehow been witness to those moments of groping, starting, and stopping in dorm rooms and backseats of cars. Despite two years at Clemson, I still adhered to the rules of Oconee County females, a code abandoned in the sixties by most of the United States but still

practiced and enforced in much of the rural South. On the surface it was simple: A woman was supposed to stay a virgin until married, but what exactly constituted virginity, that murky area between heavy petting and going all the way, was a question of byzantine complexity.

But Luke wasn't interested in testing the limits of such a code. He stood, pulling me up as well. He freed his hand from mine.

"Let me know if you change your mind."

His tone was matter-of-fact, in a way almost good-humored, the opposite of the exasperation I'd encountered in all of my other sexual skirmishes. This is what it's like to deal with a man instead of a boy, I told myself. Which only showed how much of a girl I still was.

Four weeks passed before I called Luke from Clemson and told him I wanted to canoe the Tamassee again. He knew my meaning.

"It'll have to be this weekend," Luke said. "Next week I'm off to Florida to help a friend get Wild and Scenic status for the Suwannee. She helped with the Tamassee so I owe her."

We launched early on a Saturday morning. Fog rose off the river and got tangled in the trees lining the banks. It was still late summer in Clemson, but here fall had already begun. Leaves were turning and the air was so cool we'd paddled a half mile before I took off my sweatshirt.

The fog finally thinned and the sun broke through. When it did we were in a section where stands of poplar trees lined both shores. As the last smudges of fog evaporated, the yellow sun-struck poplar leaves brightened like lamp wicks being

turned up. The air felt charged and alive, like when lightning breaks the sky before rain. Though we were in slow water, the river's pulse seemed to quicken. Everything, including Luke and me, shimmered in a golden light. For the first time in my life I saw the river the way I believed Luke saw it.

A Church of God preacher in Mountain View had denounced us as "false prophets" who worshiped nature, not God, as though one were not part of the other. At the community center we'd kidded ourselves about being religious zealots, the males giving each other nicknames that began with the word saint, we females adding Magdalene to our first names.

But Luke had never joined in the joking. On that September morning I understood his seriousness, that what we were trying to save *was* holy, for I was not just in the presence of something sacred and eternal but for a few seconds inside it. "Spots of time" was the phrase Wordsworth used for such moments, but the poet's words were no better than mine because what I felt was beyond any words that had ever been used before. You needed a new language, as members of the church I'd grown up in sometimes did when they'd been possessed by the Holy Ghost and spoken in tongues. They had writhed in the pews and aisles, their bodies contorted as though each word had to be wrenched physically free from its place in the heart. But even in those moments no one knew what they were saying, not even themselves.

We paddled on downstream. The sky widened blue above the gorge, the sun warming the river enough that light hatches of dun-colored caddis flies dimpled some pools.

"So how long will you be in Florida?" I asked.

"Probably until the rafting season starts back up."

"I didn't know you'd be gone that long," I said, and must have sounded wistful because Luke laughed.

"You sound like you're going to miss me, Maggie."

"I will," I said.

"Well, you'll have plenty of time to be around me next summer. I talked to Earl Wilkinson, and he said it's okay if you work with us as a photographer come May. You won't get rich, but you'll make as much as you would potting plants. That is, if you want the job."

"Yes," I said. "I want it."

"Good," Luke said. "I'll tell him."

We didn't speak again until we came to where Lindsey Creek entered the Tamasee. As we got out of the canoe, I lifted Luke's dry pack from the bow and brought it with us.

WALTER PHILLIPS STEPPED TO THE PODIUM AT SEVEN SHARP. HE introduced Luckadoo and set the ground rules; five minutes a person, and anyone who caused a disturbance would not only be thrown out but also arrested.

Kowalsky again spoke first, covering much the same terrain as at the first meeting, and just as abrasively, before introducing the man in the suit as his congressman. The congressman shook Kowalsky's hand and then spoke briefly, his main point being that he represented not just himself and the Kowalsky family but all of the people of Minnesota in urging that the dam be allowed. After the congressman finished, Senator Jen-

kins's aide expressed the senator's sympathy for the Kowalskys as well as his full support in helping recover their daughter's body. The governor's representative echoed their sentiments. Brennon spoke as well, emphasizing the minimal environmental impact.

Then Luke had his turn, again reading excerpts from the Wild and Scenic Rivers legislation. He didn't look at Kowalsky or Phillips or anyone in the audience. When Luke looked up from the papers he read, his eyes were on Luckadoo. But Luckadoo's eyes did not leave the watch he'd placed on the table, and though Luckadoo had a pen in his hand, he did not write down a word as Luke made his argument.

"Your five minutes are up," Luckadoo announced, looking at Luke for the first time since he'd begun speaking.

Billy was in the row in front of me. He turned in his seat. "Luckadoo didn't even pretend to listen," Billy said. "This isn't looking good at all."

The only group of people who hadn't spoken were the locals, and none of them did until the meeting was almost over.

I hadn't seen my father until he rose, slowly, unsteadily, from his chair in the second row, his hand grasping the shoulder of the man who sat beside him. I couldn't see his face but his hair was washed and combed. He wore the one suit he owned.

"He shouldn't be here," I said. "He's too sick."

"Who?" Allen asked.

"My father."

Daddy lifted a handkerchief from his back pocket and

wiped his mouth. He had once been able to fill an entire barn loft with square-baled hay in a single afternoon, a man strong enough to carry hundred-pound fertilizer sacks two at a time, but now the effort of rising from a chair winded him. I didn't want to feel sorry for him, but I couldn't look away.

"My nephew Joel ought to be saying this, but he's washed his hands of this mess," Daddy said, looking around the room as he spoke, "so I'll say it for him. If this is a matter of drilling a few holes in the riverbed, that's the thing that ought to be done. But this is a safety issue as well. I've lived on this river sixty-six years. I know the river and Joel knows it and the rest of that search-and-rescue squad knows it. One summer a few years back nine people drowned in the Tamassee. Just in that one summer. It got so bad they stretched a big net under Holder Bridge to catch the bodies."

Daddy paused to wipe the spittle from his mouth again. He turned in my direction and I saw he wore his white shirt and a tie as well as the suit. I suddenly realized that the next time he'd be wearing these clothes he might well be in his casket. I wondered if he recognized the same thing.

"Those boys know what they're doing, and they've done all they could to get that body out. Anybody who says otherwise is wrong."

He paused again.

"We all make mistakes, and sometimes we pay a high price for them. That girl made a mistake when she tried to cross that river, she paid the highest price of all. She didn't know how dangerous that river was, but you've all been told now.

You just be sure that dam works, Mr. Brennon, because that river isn't something to trifle with."

The man beside Daddy helped him sit back down.

"Is that it?" Luckadoo asked, his eyes sweeping the room. "If so, I'm going to give the last five minutes to Ruth Kowalsky's mother."

Mrs. Kowalsky stepped up to the lectern. She wore a black dress that reached closer to her ankles than her knees, and I wondered if like my father she also wore funeral clothes, not for herself but for her daughter.

She was a tall slim woman, a woman who had retained her beauty into middle age, conceding only a few wrinkles around the eyes and mouth. Her hair was frosted blond, cut short and stylishly by someone very talented and no doubt very expensive. But her beauty seemed fragile as an eggshell. You could tell something had broken inside her in the halting way she walked to the lectern.

"Oh, shit," one of the river rats sitting with Luke said. He hadn't spoken loudly, but the room was so still his words carried like a shout.

"My name is Ellen Kowalsky, and I'm Ruth's mother," she began. "My husband didn't want me to come tonight. But I had to. You didn't know Ruth, but I'm going to tell you about her, because maybe if I can give you some sense of what she was like, you will understand why it's so important to us to take her home, to give her a proper burial."

Ellen Kowalsky spoke slowly, her words carefully enunciated, making each word seem tentative, difficult. She did not

look at us but above and past us. Her eyes were fixed on the back wall as though she were scaling it, each word she spoke another piton.

She'll never make it through this, I said to myself, because her eyes already glistened with tears. I thought of her diving into the pool below Wolf Cliff Falls, hands searching for her daughter as she moved along the bottom until she'd had to surface. What had she thought or said to her husband as he restrained her from entering the pool a third time? Had she begged him to let her go, tried to break free from his grasp?

I tried to imagine what it would be like to watch your child being swept away. How many nights would you wake in the dark, gasping for breath, as you thought of her trying to breathe? How often would you wonder if you'd only gone to Grandfather Mountain or Asheville your daughter would be alive now?

No, I couldn't imagine what those moments had been like for Ellen Kowalsky, but as I glanced over at Allen's face I knew he could, that there were times he thought about what his life would be like now if he'd taken an earlier flight, or a later one, or told his wife he'd take a taxi home or decided, as she'd evidently wished, not to go to Kosovo at all.

Walter Phillips got up from his chair, as if to offer his seat to Ellen Kowalsky.

"You don't have to do this, Ellen," Herb Kowalsky said, a tenderness in his voice I'd not heard before. That tenderness surprised me and, I suspected, a number of other people in the room. But maybe not his wife. I wondered if I had made some judgments about Herb Kowalsky that were a little too

easy and convenient. Yet even as I thought this another part of me remembered the scorn in his voice when he'd spoken of hillbillies.

"Yes, I do," Ellen Kowalsky replied, glancing back at her husband as she spoke. She blinked quickly and for a few moments stared at the back wall again, securing her hold before continuing. She took a deep breath and lowered her eyes so she might see ours.

"I could tell you Ruth was the perfect child, that she never gave her father or me any trouble and was always good to her brother."

A woman on the second row began to cry, loud enough to make Ellen Kowalsky pause and raise her eyes to the back wall again.

"But you'd know that couldn't be true of any child, so I'll tell what's true, that there were times Ruth tried our patience, times we had to punish her, times she disappointed us."

The *Atlanta Constitution's* photographer took a photo. Several people turned and glared at him. Neither he nor anyone else took another one.

"In other words, she was like anybody else's child. But there were times we were short-tempered with her when we shouldn't have been and times we didn't give her as much attention and love as we could have. Any parent in this room knows how that can happen. We get so caught up in our own lives we forget that nothing's more important than our children. We always say we'll make it up to them tomorrow or this weekend or on a birthday or Christmas. We assume that tomorrow or that birthday is going to come."



Ellen Kowalsky had used up her allotted time, but no one in the room was going to tell her that. Her voice softened even more, almost a whisper now, as if she were in a confessional booth instead of a rural community center.

“But sometimes that day doesn’t come, and the things you meant to do or say can’t be said or done because the child is no longer there. The vacation was my idea. It seemed like we hadn’t been seeing each other much, not even eating meals at the same time. I thought a few days together would bring us closer as a family. And it had. We’d had two good days together, until we came here.”

Ellen Kowalsky paused for a few moments. The room was so quiet I could hear crickets chirping outside the open windows. Suddenly I realized Ellen Kowalsky wasn’t looking at the back wall. She was looking *through* it, past the bridge and Bobcat Rock, all the way to that undercut inside Wolf Cliff Falls.

“I can only do one more thing for Ruth, and that is to get her out of the river, because it’s not just her body down there but her soul. That’s what my church has said for hundreds of years—that a person is in purgatory until the body is given Last Rites. My husband, even my priest, say they don’t believe that.”

Ellen Kowalsky lowered her eyes and looked straight at us.

“But what if they’re wrong?”

No one in the room was ready for that statement. The reporters and other outsiders might have written off Ellen Kowalsky’s concern as a bizarre symptom of her grief, but I

knew many of the locals, though low-church Protestants, would not dismiss her fear or its premise.

Ellen Kowalsky continued to look at us as she spoke.

“I’ve already tried to bring Ruth out of that place, and I couldn’t do it, at least not by myself. I need the help of Mr. Brennon and his dam. And I need the Forest Service and the rest of the people in this room to support Mr. Brennon. It’s the last thing I can do,” she said, her voice starting to falter. “It’s too late for anything else.”

At that moment not even the most cynical person in the room could have doubted that the loss of her child had broken Ellen Kowalsky, and that she would not begin to heal until her child was buried in earth, not water.

Brennon stood by the chair Ellen Kowalsky sat in. He leaned toward her, his hand on her shoulder. He spoke, and she nodded. Brennon’s facial expression made clear his concern about recovering Ruth was now emotional as well as professional.

Billy turned to me and shook his head. “It’s a done deal,” he said.

Luke knew as well as Billy that he had lost. What restraint he’d had so far disappeared. As soon as Daniel Luckadoo said the meeting was adjourned Luke started to the front, weaving through the people who filled the aisle.

“It’s federal law, Luckadoo,” he shouted. “Federal law. It’s not something you or anybody else decides. It’s been decided, and if you allow this dam you’re breaking the law and you know it.”

Sheriff Cantrell and Hubert McClure grabbed Luke by the arms before he could say anything else. They shoved him through the crowd and out the door. People soon began to follow them out.

I left Allen and made my way to the second row of chairs where Daddy still sat.

"You shouldn't have come," I said.

Daddy looked up at me.

"I figured no one else would say some things that needed to be said. It turned out I was right."

"Who brought you?" I asked, because Daddy hadn't been sitting with anyone I knew.

"Joel dropped me off. He wouldn't come in though."

"When's he coming back to get you?"

"I don't know that he will. I figured to get a ride with someone heading out that way."

I looked around the room. Billy was gone as well as anyone else who might be driving down Damascus Church Road.

"Did Joel say he'd be at home?" I asked.

"He didn't say."

I looked up front. Myra Burrell had not left, but she lived back toward the river.

"Let me get the car keys," I said.

"You don't have to take me," Daddy said, the stubbornness in his voice pricking like a briar.

I walked up to the podium where Allen had joined the circle of reporters around Brennon and Kowalsky.

"I need the car keys so I can take my father home," I told him.

Allen fished the keys from his front pocket. "You want me to go with you?"

"No," I said. "It's not far. I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

"I would like to meet him," Allen said.

"Some other time," I said, and walked out to the parking lot where Daddy waited.

The sun was settling into the trees now, and shadows unfurled up mountainsides. Across the road in Herb Greene's pasture, cows clumped together under trees. Daddy didn't see them. If he had he'd have said it was a sure sign of coming rain.

"You ought to turn on your headlights," Daddy said, as I pulled out of the parking lot.

"I know how to drive," I said, then turned on the headlights anyway. It was simpler to do so.

"It seems I can't ever say the right thing to you," he said, his words low, too low to tell which of us he felt was responsible for that.

We passed Billy's store. Billy and Wanda sat on the porch while their boys kicked a ball in the parking lot.

Daddy shifted in his seat. I looked at the road but I knew his eyes were on me.

"There's things I got to say to you," he said.

It seemed unlikely, but I wondered if he'd planned on me driving him home. Done it just to get me in a place where I had to hear him out. Daddy's voice trembled when he spoke.

"There ain't a day goes by I don't think about me leaving you and Ben alone. I forgot all about those beans on the stove. I'd have never went to the store if I hadn't."

"I don't want to hear this," I said.

"Your Momma forgave me. Your brother, the one with the most right to be hard-hearted, he forgave me. But you ain't and maybe God ain't either. You know what it says in Matthew, Maggie. You ain't forgot all your Bible yet, have you? 'But whosoever shall hurt one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.' "

I turned onto Damascus Church Road, but the house was still a mile away. I pressed the radio's ON-OFF button, but I'd forgotten how few stations reached this deep into the mountains. Allen had the radio on the AM band. All I got was static.

"Do you know how many times that verse jabbed barb-deep in my heart? I know what I done," Daddy said, his voice trembling, "and not just to Ben but to you."

How damn convenient this is, I thought. You wait till you're dying and make this dramatic confession and everything's set straight, everything's forgiven, a perfect Hollywood ending.

"I blame myself and always have," Daddy said.

Don't let him pull you into this, I'd been telling myself the last few minutes, but the self-pity in his voice made me speak.

"Then why did you treat Ben like it was his fault?" I said. "Why didn't you ever tell me that I shouldn't blame myself, that it was your fault, not mine? It mattered then."

I crossed over Licklog Creek and then up the last rise. I drove up to the house and put the car in park but did not turn off the engine.

"Why can't it matter now?" Daddy asked.

Because I don't want to let you off that easy, I thought. Because you're the only one left to blame.

"I've got to go," I said.

Daddy got out of the car and closed the door. I watched him slowly climb the steps, his hand gripping the rail. Please don't look back at me, I thought, and he didn't.

I drove back to the community center, the place where two decades earlier the pig picking had been held to help my family pay Ben's hospital bills. Neighbors and friends had brought yellow ware filled with cole slaw and baked beans and potato salad, gallon jars of sweet tea and home-made ice cream still in the churns. The women covered tables with food and drinks while Daddy and the other men huddled out back with Lou Henson as he basted the pig with a paintbrush.

I'd been inside with Aunt Margaret and the other women. They made a fuss over me, telling me how pretty I was and how much I'd grown. They were good women and they meant well, but it somehow made it all worse, being treated like I'd just been baptized or had a birthday and Ben still in the burn center in Columbia with only Momma there with him. I made my way out the back door, walking as fast as I could down the path to the creek, my hand over my nose and mouth to block out the smell of burning pig.

I sat by myself on the bank until Aunt Margaret came. Though she wore a dress she sat down beside me. "I know this is hard time for you, girl," Aunt Margaret had said. "But it's going to get better." It could have been five minutes or it

could have been thirty, but Daddy came down to the creek as well. He carried two paper plates sagging with food. He handed us the plates and plastic forks and napkins, then went back to get our tea. He sat down beside me on the bank. "I reckon we've had about as much kindness as we can stand," he'd said, as his left hand settled awkwardly on my shoulder.

It was not a convenient memory, because I couldn't frame it neatly into the black-and-white photograph I'd made of my past.

WHEN I ENTERED THE COMMUNITY CENTER, ALLEN AND ONE other reporter remained with Luckadoo, Phillips, and the Kowalskys. A few river rats lingered at the back, looking lost without Luke.

"You all right?" Allen asked, as we drove back to the motel. "You looked upset when you first came back."

"I'm fine now."

"This problem between you and your father, is it something recent?"

"No."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not tonight. Maybe some other time."

Allen's right hand touched my arm. "We can talk of other things, though. Right?"

"Right," I said.

At the motel Allen parked the car and turned off the ignition. Neither of us reached for the door latch.

"So what other things do you want to talk about tonight?" I asked.

Allen looked straight at me. "How about that I'm falling in love with you. That I want to be with you tonight, but I'm not sure that's what you want."

"It's what I want," I said.

"It's been a year and a half," Allen said. "I'm not sure how well it will go."

"I think we're after something more significant than a one-night stand," I said. "Tonight won't decide what happens between us."

A Chevy Blazer pulled into the lot, and one of the cameramen who'd been at the meeting got out and entered the lobby. The motel's gaudy neon sign flickered on. For the first time I could remember, the Tamasee River Motel flashed its NO VACANCY sign.

As the parking lot filled up around us, the room windows brightened. Occasionally there was the sound of an ice bucket being filled, a door being shut. Lightning bugs sparked as they hovered above grass already dampened with dew. We left the car and went to our separate rooms.

In the bathroom I found that the onset of love had not produced any miracles as far as my appearance, so I settled for what cosmetics could do. Many of the older people in Tamasee believed mirrors were passageways between the living and the dead, and after funerals every mirror in a house was veiled so the departed couldn't return. Aunt Margaret had done the same when Momma died, shrouding each one with a piece of dark muslin. I wondered what Claire Pritchard-

Hemphill might feel if she watched me prepare myself to make love to her husband. A dim sadness? Or perhaps the dead were beyond such human concerns.

I cut off the light and went into the main room and sat on the bed. When I heard Allen's footsteps I did not wait for a knock before opening the door.

## CHAPTER 8

I woke to the sound of rain. Lying in bed I wondered if the Kowalskys and Brennon also heard that rain and understood what it meant.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," Allen said, when I opened my eyes. He nuzzled close to me.

"It's raining," I said, settling my back deeper into Allen's chest.

"Good," Allen whispered, pressing his mouth against my ear. "There's nothing better than being in bed with a woman on a rainy morning."

"It's not good for Brennon or Kowalsky," I said. "If the Tamasee rises over one and a half feet, I doubt they'll be able

to put that dam up even if Luckadoo does give them permission.”

“Maybe the rain will let up soon.”

“Maybe, but it also depends on what it’s doing upstream.” I looked at the clock on the lamp table. “Almost eight,” I said. “What time will they make the announcement?”

“Phillips said between eleven and twelve.” “We’ve still got a little while,” he said, as I turned to him.

BY THE TIME WE GOT TO THE RANGER STATION, THE RAIN HAD thinned to drizzle. Fog on the Tamasee’s surface smoldered like a doused fire. The air was cool, and I was glad I’d packed a sweatshirt. The calendar might say it was June, but it seemed more like October, the kind of morning I’d always enjoyed on the river, because everything, even the water, was always quieter. On those mornings the fog felt like a countercurrent, moving opposite the earth’s rotation to hold everything, even time, in abeyance. I hoped, if Mrs. Kowalsky was somehow right, that this was what her daughter’s soul now felt. Not fear or loneliness but a sense of being one with something transcendently beautiful.

“Why the wry smile?” Allen asked, taking my hand.

“A realization that at least in spirit I’m still one of Luke’s followers.”

“He’s not the only person who cares about that river,” Allen said, and there was irritation in his voice.

I squeezed his hand.

“I know that. I’m just saying that if you spend enough time

on the Tamasee you can’t help but believe a lot of what Luke believes.”

Allen freed his hand from mine. “But you don’t regret taking the photo?” he asked.

A part of me wanted to answer no and leave it at that, because things were going well between us, too well to let something already done create a problem. But I couldn’t do that.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m afraid I do.”

Anger sparked and caught in Allen’s eyes. “And I’m responsible for setting up that photograph, right? That’s what you said in my office.”

“I could have left it in the darkroom. It was my decision to give it to Lee.”

I paused as a camera crew from a Greenville TV station passed. Billy walked toward us, saw our faces, and quickly changed direction.

“So even after last night’s meeting you still want Ruth Kowalsky’s body to stay in that river?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t want that. But I don’t want the river damaged either. Luke’s right about what can happen when a precedent is set.”

“And you’d feel that way even if it were your child in that river? You’re like Luke that way as well?”

“I don’t know what I’d feel,” I said.

“No, you don’t,” Allen said. “But Ellen Kowalsky knows. It’s not some abstraction she can look at with detachment.”

Nor can you, I thought. Maybe none of us can be detached.

“It’s done,” I said. “I don’t want us to fight about this.”

"I don't either," Allen said, but his tone wasn't convincing. He nodded toward the front porch of the ranger station, where the Kowalskys stood with Brennon and the congressman. "But I don't understand why you can't feel good if this woman finally has some closure."

"I will," I said. "About that at least."

When Luckadoo and Walters stepped out of the ranger office, Allen and I moved closer, joining a crowd of over a hundred people. Almost everyone who'd been at last night's meeting had come to hear the Forest Service's decision, including the press, which counted among its ranks two camera crews who had not been present at the community center. I did not see the aides to the governor or Senator Jenkins. They knew the outcome and were already headed back to Columbia and Washington.

Luke had come as well, fresh out of the county jail. He stood with the river rats. Sheriff Cantrell and Hubert McClure leaned against the porch's side railing, their eyes steady on them.

Luckadoo took out a pair of black reading glasses and read from a sheet of paper.

"The Forest Service has decided that under the present circumstances a portable, temporary dam built by Brennon Corporation will be allowed at Wolf Cliff Falls on Section Five of the Tamasee River."

Brennon and Kowalsky shook hands as Mrs. Kowalsky hugged the congressman.

"This will never hold up, Luckadoo," Luke shouted, as a woman held a microphone to his face. "I promise you Sierra

Club lawyers will start petitioning the courts on behalf of the Tamasee this very afternoon."

"Are you saying you believe you can still stop this?" the reporter asked.

"We're going to sure as hell try, lady."

Luke turned from the reporter, and when he did he saw me. He shoved through the dispersing crowd until we were face-to-face. His clothes were soaked. Dark crescents lay beneath his eyes.

"Do you think the Kowalskys understand what they're going to find down there after almost five weeks?" he asked me.

"I don't know," I said, and as soon as I spoke realized I'd kept the truth from myself. Because the image I'd been carrying around in my head was of Ruth Kowalsky minutes after she drowned, not weeks. I'd pictured her in some timeless state. Maybe her soul was, but not her body.

"Well, I have a pretty good idea, Maggie," Luke said, "and you do as well."

And I did, because I knew not only what water could do to a body given time but also what crayfish and larvae and fish could do.

The reporter had trailed Luke over to where we stood. She stuck the microphone back in Luke's face.

"Are you saying the body will be damaged?" she asked.

The stupidity of the question seemed to calm Luke for a moment.

"Get your cameraman over here," he told her. "My answer will make a good segment for your evening news."

The reporter motioned for the cameraman. When Luke saw the red recording light come on, he turned to the camera and began to speak.

"I helped bring a college student out of Bear Sluice two summers ago. He'd only been in there five days, not five weeks. We could get to him, but the water was too strong to pull him out by hand. We tied cable around him and used a winch. We gave the winch five turns and an arm and head came flying out and landed on a sandbar. We got the rest of him out one piece at a time."

The reporter's mouth opened as if she were about to gag. She lowered the microphone, her free hand signaling for the cameraman to stop recording.

Luke turned and moved in, his face only inches from mine.

"That kid's parents were there," Luke said. "They saw it all, Maggie."

"I know that," I said.

Luke was so close I could feel his breath when he spoke. "God, I hope this isn't just some twisted way to get back at me for what happened between me and you years ago."

"Don't flatter yourself," I said, meeting Luke's eyes.

"Ease up, Miller," Allen said, stepping closer to fill the void left by the reporter.

Luke turned to Allen. Eighteen hours of frustration showed on his face.

"A friend of mine sent me information about you she found on the Internet. Information about your wife and daughter. I could tell you what I think your part in this is really about."

Sheriff Cantrell and Hubert McClure were walking rapidly

in our direction. People were clearing a space around us. Carolyn left a bench and walked toward us as well.

Luke turned from Allen and looked at me. "But I won't," Luke said.

Sheriff Cantrell stepped between Luke and Allen.

"What's going on here?" he said.

"Nothing," Luke said. "I'm leaving."

"Good," Sheriff Cantrell said.

"Let's go," Luke said to Carolyn, who stood beside him now.

"One more thing, Miller," Sheriff Cantrell said. "I don't want you or any of your buddies within fifty yards of that dam."

Luke turned away.

"Fifty yards," Sheriff Cantrell reiterated. "If you get any closer to that dam I'll lock you up, and the bond will be a sight higher than five hundred dollars. We clear on that?"

Luke and Carolyn walked across the road to his truck and drove off. I leaned close to Allen.

"You okay?" I asked.

Allen didn't reply.

"Luke was just trying to make you angry."

"No, not angry," Allen said. "He was ready to say some things to hurt me." Allen paused. "But he didn't. If I'd been him I'm not so sure I would have held back."

Allen looked up at the porch where Ellen Kowalsky continued to talk to her congressman. He watched her for almost a minute.

"You want to go back to the motel?" I asked.



"No," Allen said. "I need to ask Brennon a few questions."  
"I'll go too," I said. "I might get a good photograph."

Five reporters were already ahead of us. I took out the Nikon and snapped some photos, mainly of Kowalsky, who smiled and patted backs as though he'd finally closed a long negotiated and frustrating business deal. But as soon as that thought came to me I knew I was being unfair. This was probably the first thing he'd had the slightest reason to feel good about in almost a month. I stashed my camera in my backpack and looked at the sky and saw the sun trying to rub through the gray overcast.

"Ask him about the rain," I prodded, as Brennon finished with the reporter in front of us.

Brennon smiled when he saw Allen and me and extended his hand. He was more animated than I'd seen him before.

"Finally some good news, eh?" he said. "And you two had a lot to do with it. That article and photograph made a huge difference, especially with the politicians."

"Good news for you all at least," Allen said.

"Yes," Brennon said. He motioned toward the Kowalskys. "When Herb called two weeks ago and asked me to help I almost said no. But after hearing Ellen last night—well, I'm just glad I'm here."

"What about the rain?" Allen asked.

"One of my people has been keeping tabs. It's not over two feet yet."

I stepped closer.

"You'd go in at two feet?"

"Sure," Brennon said. "We built one last year and the water was two point three."

"But this is white water," I said, trying to keep my voice level.

"Doesn't make any difference. Besides, the river's going down some. It won't be above one point eight before we start."

"And when do you start?" Allen asked.

"Two o'clock this afternoon. My men are waiting at the motel with the equipment. All I have to do now is get in touch with those twins. They're doing the diving. The only problem is, I can't call them because I've forgotten their last name."

"It's Moseley," I said. "Ronny and Randy Moseley."

"Yeah," Brennon said. "That's it."

THERE HAD BEEN A WELL-MAINTAINED CUTBACK TRAIL LEADING to Wolf Cliff Falls, but it no longer existed. The bulldozer we'd passed on the logging road had gouged a new trail—a road-wide, hundred-yard mudslide. Foot traffic made it worse, as people slipped and slid down the ridge, grabbing onto scrub oaks and mountain laurel to keep from tumbling into the river.

"This shouldn't have been allowed," I said to Allen, as we made our way down the ridge. "There will be silt running into the river for years. It will be like a bleeding sore."

"How could they have stopped it?" Allen asked. "The dam had to be brought in."

"They could have gotten it in without using a bulldozer. It's another violation of federal law, and Luckadoo's announcement this morning didn't authorize it."

"An example of Luke's domino theory?" Allen asked.

"I'd say it's no longer a theory. The proof is all around us, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Allen said, and his voice was conciliatory. He stopped and lightly gripped my arm so I stopped as well. "Using the bulldozer's wrong," he said. "And I'll say so in my next article."

Allen lowered his voice as two more reporters stumbled past us.

"I don't want this to be a problem between us."

"I don't either," I said, "so we won't let it be."

"Good," Allen said. "When this is over I want to canoe this river. Just you and me. I want to know this watershed the way you do."

Back up the ridge someone cursed. A few moments later a video camera banged down the trail, splitting apart when it hit a river rock.

"One less Channel Seven exclusive," Allen said.

But there were plenty more camera crews and a couple of dozen reporters and photographers. Plenty of gawkers, too, standing and sitting downstream of Wolf Cliff Falls.

Walter Phillips stood at the edge of the pool, a walkie-talkie pressed to his ear. Sheriff Cantrell and Hubert McClure were there as well. Across the river, Luke and his group perched like hawks on a granite outcrop. They were far enough away

to keep Sheriff Cantrell happy, though I suspected he would have been even more pleased if they hadn't shown up at all.

More people came down the trail, including Kowalsky and his wife, then Brennon and his crew of eight men who carried the portable dam. Ronny and Randy came with them.

"I'm going to talk with the Kowalskys a minute," Allen said.

I found a place on the bank dried by the sun and sat down. I opened my backpack and made sure the camera equipment and flashlight had not been damaged in the descent.

The sun shone full on Wolf Cliff now, giving the cliff face a silvery sheen. The sky above was blue, though I knew as well as anyone else who lived here how quickly that could change. If that blue sky holds a few hours they'll probably be able to do it, I thought.

Shore rocks dry last week lay partially submerged. Rhododendron leaves that had been untouched now bent with the current. The water itself was clearing but still dingy, like watered-down coffee. Driftwood, twigs, and leaves circled in eddies. I would have guessed two feet above normal.

"Quite a circus, ain't it," Billy said, sitting down beside me.

"Yes, it is," I said, moving over to give him more room. "You think the water will get low enough for them to try?"

"It was two point three at noon. I haven't seen a rafting party yet, so I guess Earl thinks it's still too high. But it is going down. I'd guess an even two now, one point eight at the lowest."

"That's about what I was thinking."

Brennon's men put on bright orange life jackets and clasped

safety belts around their waists. They huddled around Brennon while Ronny and Randy sat together on the bank behind them, caps pulled low over their eyes, their diving equipment beside them.

"Look at that," Billy said, and pointed into the water. A dead raccoon floated downriver, its belly swollen as if pregnant.

"Got swept in, I reckon," Billy said. "They're usually smarter than that."

More people came down the trail.

"Shit," Billy said. "The Forest Service should've put up bleachers and charged admission."

People crowded the bank now, talking excitedly as if waiting for a boat race or athletic contest to begin. Several teenagers took off their shoes and splashed each other in the shallows. A man stood on the rock where I'd photographed Herb Kowalsky. He ate a Hardee's breakfast biscuit as he peered into the water.

I looked upstream and saw Ellen Kowalsky standing on the bank alone. She wore dark slacks and a dress jacket.

Billy looked back up the trail. "Please, Lord," he said, raising his eyes skyward, "let that son of a bitch fall and bust his ass. Let him roll all the way into the river."

I turned and saw Bryan thirty yards up the trail. He wore chinos and a green sports shirt. He also wore a pair of Dock-siders, their slick soles offering as much grip on the mud as bald car tires on ice. One hand clutched a limb of mountain laurel. Bryan looked unsure whether to go down or back up.

He moved closer to the plant, using its main stem to secure his right foot. A camera was strapped on his neck and he raised it, photographing the trail and the men installing the dam.

It would set a precedent, Luke had said at the first meeting. Bryan now had proof of that precedent.

Bryan took his final shot and tentatively turned around. He took a step and slipped, righted himself before he fell, and made his way cautiously back up the trail.

"No good can come of those photos," Billy said.

"No," I said. "No good at all."

Allen and Kowalsky stood on the shore edge together, but Kowalsky had turned to watch Brennon's men. Allen faced the river. I stood and raised my camera, focusing in on Allen, bringing his face closer to mine. Allen turned in my direction and when he saw the camera he smiled. I clicked the shutter twice. Maybe I'll have one good memory of this place, I thought, and sat back down.

"Have you heard back from Fish and Wildlife about your photos?" I asked.

"I did," Billy said. "Their mountain lion expert wrote and said they were, in his words, 'intriguing.' He's in Tennessee, but he said come winter to call him after we get a good snow. He said he'd drive over and we could look for tracks."

"That's exciting," I said. "Your sighting may be verified yet."

"Yes," Billy said. "It would be nice to be proved right. But that's not the best part."

"What's better?"

"Knowing that despite people like Bryan and Luckadoo there's still enough wild acreage left up here to hide a few things."

Billy looked upstream to where Brennon's men worked.

"At least for a little while longer," Billy said.

"Maybe more than a little while," I said. "There are plenty of people who will fight Bryan if he tries to harm this watershed."

"We'll see," Billy said. "But I've got a feeling all this is going to make it a hell of a lot harder."

Across the river Joel emerged from the woods. He was by himself.

"I'm surprised he's come," I said.

"He wants to see himself vindicated," Billy said. "He came in the store yesterday and said he doesn't believe they'll be able to raise one portion of that dam without it being knocked down."

"He might be right," I replied. "Especially if they try today."

Four of Brennon's men hooked ropes onto their belts. Two held jackhammers, two others bracing pins. The men waded into the flat water where Ruth Kowalsky had lost her footing. They moved with care, aiming to plant their feet on sand instead of algae-slick rocks. From the shore Brennon directed them to the places Ronny and Randy had found bedrock and they began to drill.

"Looks like they made up their minds to try," Billy said.

A clattering suddenly rose from above Wolf Cliff, and a helicopter came into view. The machine hovered above the trees like a dragonfly, its shadow falling on the water as a

cameraman leaned out to film. The river rats thrust their middle fingers in the air. Several people on the bank waved.

Billy stood and dusted off the back of his jeans.

"I should have known better than to come," he said. "This is worse than gawking at a car wreck." He looked across the river at Luke. "I'm on the wrong side of the river anyway. I'll see you later, Maggie."

Billy made his way back up the ridge as the helicopter rose and vanished over Wolf Cliff.

The sky was silent again, and still mainly blue, but darker clouds pressed in from the north.

Allen stood with Phillips now. I took out the Nikon and photographed Brennon's men in the river drilling, the others assembling portions of the dam. The water continued to clear. First glints of mica came to light, then the white sand, and finally the scuttle of minnows and crayfish and the drift of caddis-fly pupas. It was like watching a photograph rinse into clarity.

Luke now watched through a pair of binoculars. The binoculars aimed at Brennon's men then shifted to the bulldozed gash before returning to the river. I had known Luke for eight years, and in that time my feelings toward him had covered the emotional gamut from love to hate. Only now did I feel something close to sorrow.

"PHILLIPS CHECKED IN WITH EARL WILKINSON UP AT THE bridge," Allen said, when he sat down. "The river is up to one point nine."

"And they're still going to try?"

"Phillips isn't thrilled, to say the least. I get the feeling if it were his call he'd stop it, but he's getting big-time pressure, and it's evidently coming from the governor on down."

Allen shrugged.

"Who knows. Brennon says it will work, even with the water high."

"I'm not so sure," I said.

The helicopter clattered back over the gorge.

"How long will it take them to put it up?" I asked.

"Two more hours at most. They'll drill seven holes, then bolt the supports together and stretch polyurethane across it. Then the divers go in."

I looked at Randy and Ronny.

"Has Brennon asked the Moseleys what they think about the water level?"

"I doubt it. This is Brennon's dam. I suppose he figures he knows more than anyone else about what it can and can't do."

Allen and I sat down on the shore. He pressed his hand against the back of my neck, his fingers kneading the muscles. I closed my eyes and let my head lean back into his touch.

"That feels good," I said, rolling my head from side to side, the sun warm on my upraised face. The tensions of the last few days broke free and drifted away. "It's obvious Freud never gave a woman a neck rub, else he'd never have asked what a woman wants."

"I see," Allen said. "I'll have to remember that."

I leaned my head in the crevice between Allen's neck and

shoulder, my eyes still closed. I could smell his aftershave, the shampoo in his hair, and soap on his skin.

I closed my eyes and must have napped, because when I opened them the drillers had waded out of the water, and seven metal braces rose like submarine periscopes in the water above the falls. I watched Brennon's crew bolt the braces together. All the men wore life jackets and safety ropes. Four worked in the water while the other four held the ropes.

I stood to look more closely at the river. The water was dingy again. I saw Joel on the far bank. He knew as well as I what that dingy water meant.

I looked over at Phillips, the walkie-talkie strapped like a second pistol on his hip, then at Randy and Ronny, who were in their wet suits.

"He may already know it, but I'd better go tell Phillips it's raining upstream," I said.

"You want me to go with you?" Allen asked.

"No, I'll just be a second."

I walked upstream to where Phillips stood with Brennon and Herb Kowalsky.

"It's raining upriver," I said, "probably near the Georgia line."

"We know that," Phillips said. "Earl Wilkinson called a few minutes ago."

"But it's not a real heavy rain," Brennon said, as much as to Phillips as me. "The river may not go down anymore, but it won't go up much either."

"What does Earl say the level is now?"

I was asking Phillips, but Brennon answered. "It's an even two feet. We're still fine."

"I think you'd better postpone this awhile," I said to Phillips.

"This has been decided," Brennon said. "Not by me or Mr. Phillips here but by Superintendent Luckadoo. Nothing can stop that dam from going up now."

"The Tamasee can stop it," I said, and pointed upstream where the big white oak balanced on the boulders. "If it can do that, it can knock down a piece of polyurethane."

I turned to Phillips.

"Luckadoo's lived in the piedmont all his life. He doesn't know anything about white water either. Only the people up here know."

Brennon was a man who had revealed little of himself. I did not know if he was being paid by Kowalsky or had volunteered his time and equipment. I didn't even know if he had children himself. But in the last twelve hours there had been glimpses, first his compassion and now a much less noble attribute—arrogance.

"I keep hearing that," Brennon said, "and it's going to give me a lot of satisfaction when I prove all you self-proclaimed experts wrong."

Phillips didn't speak for a few seconds. His eyes scanning the river's edge, he looked like a man trying to read a language he didn't understand.

"You're positive this dam's going to work," Phillips finally said, his eyes steady on the river.

"Yes, yes, yes," Brennon said. "This is what I do for a living.

I make them and I test them. Do I have to give you a sworn affidavit to be believed?"

"Okay," Phillips said.

"At least make them wait a few hours," I said.

"Why?" Brennon asked. "So we can risk a downpour?" He turned to his men. "Let's get going."

I walked downstream. When I glanced back, Phillips's eyes were still on the river.

I sat down beside Allen and we watched as four of Brennon's crew shouldered the rolled-up polyurethane and waded into the water. When they got midstream they fastened it to the metal and began to work their way back toward shore. The dam unfolded like a huge flag. The river surged against the taut polyurethane, but the first section held. The dam was an A-frame, something I hadn't realized until I saw the middle section unfold.

As Brennon's crew installed the second section, one of the workers slipped. One moment he stood by a metal brace, and the next he hurtled downstream toward Wolf Cliff Falls, his arms flailing for a hold that wasn't there. Suddenly his rope jerked tight. The worker was dragged and jolted across the current toward shore, the man holding the rope now joined by two other men in a tug-of-war with the river. They didn't quit pulling until he lay on a sandbar gasping for breath. He refused to go back in.

Joel had made his way upstream and stood directly across from Randy and Ronny. When he got their attention he shook his head.

"Is he telling them not to go in?" Allen asked.

"Yes, that it's too dangerous."

Brennon's crew worked in shallower water now and their progress quickened. The crowd on the shore became more attentive. Several of the men shouted encouragement. A woman lifted a crying child so it could see better. The teenagers quit splashing each other and watched the men struggle to anchor the last of the polyurethane.

The Kowalskys had been standing away from everyone else. But now they came to the pool's edge. Wearing hiking boots, jeans, and a flannel shirt, Herb Kowalsky had dressed appropriately for the descent into the gorge, but his wife had not. Ellen Kowalsky's sole concession to the terrain was a pair of black Reebok walking shoes, but the incongruity of her mismatched outfit did not lessen her dignity.

She had evidently slipped during the descent, for mud stained her right leg and the side of her dress. She stood with her feet slightly apart, one hand clasping her husband's upper arm as if she too bolstered the final link of the dam.

Water hammered against all three sections of polyurethane. The dam bowed against the pressure as the water rose, but it held.

"It's going to work," Allen said, as I raised my Nikon and took several shots of the completed dam.

The water did as Brennon said it would, diverting into the right side of the river, cutting the flow over Wolf Creek Falls in half.

I moved my head and framed an upstream rock on the far shoreline that had been completely dry half an hour ago. Water rubbed against it now.

"For a little while anyway," I said.

I lowered my camera and looked upstream at Ellen Kowalsky. She had let go of her husband's arm. She faced the pool but her eyes were slightly averted, as though afraid to look directly at the water that held not her daughter but her daughter's remains. I wondered if she had only now begun to realize what she was about to see.

"Do you think she's ready for this?" Allen asked.

"No. Whatever comes out of that pool is going to be worse than anything she could imagine."

I looked at the rock again but couldn't tell if the water had risen any higher.

"She probably should have stayed at her motel," I said.

"Yes," Allen said. "I understand that she has to see the body, but I wish for her sake it could be in a funeral home and in private."

Brennon waved us toward him.

"Come on," Allen said, as he stood up, "they must be getting ready to send a diver in."

I put the Nikon in my backpack before standing up.

"You don't think you'll need that?" Allen asked.

"No," I said, looking at Ellen Kowalsky.

We walked upstream, passing Sheriff Cantrell and Hubert McClure, who were now holding back everyone but the press from the pool. Sheriff Cantrell nodded as I passed. He might not have remembered my first name but he knew who I was because years ago he and Daddy had fished and hunted some together. Sheriff Cantrell had come by our house the week Ben had gotten home from the burn center. He'd given Ben

a deputy's badge and told him to heal up quick so they could go catch some bad guys.

It would have been interesting to know which people, if any, Sheriff Cantrell considered the bad guys in this situation. He was too busy watching Luke and the crowd to talk now, but even if he'd had the time I knew he would have kept his thoughts to himself. Although the political pressure wasn't as overt as on Walter Phillips, I suspected Sheriff Cantrell had received his share of e-mails and phone calls from Columbia politicians.

When Brennon gathered everyone he wanted by the pool, he turned to where Randy and Ronny sat on the bank.

"You guys ready?" he asked.

Randy looked at Brennon and shook his head. "We ain't going in. River's too high."

"You're not going in?" Brennon said, his voice incredulous.

Herb Kowalsky moved closer to Brennon. "What?" Kowalsky asked, looking not at the twins but at Brennon. "They're not going in after all this?"

"You've got to go in," Brennon said.

"We ain't got to do nothing," Ronny said.

Randy heaved his oxygen tank toward Brennon. The metal clanged as it hit the ground. Ronny did the same, but aimed his toward Kowalsky.

"There," Randy said. "You two go in if you're so sure it's safe."

The gorge suddenly seemed quieter, even the water. I looked at the dam. The water rose to within a foot of the top. The polyurethane waved and billowed. Joel no longer stood

on the far bank. He walked slowly up the trail. Like Billy, he'd evidently seen enough.

"Please," Ellen Kowalsky pleaded. "Please get my daughter out of there."

She opened her palms to Randy as if to say she had nothing to offer but her words.

"Please," she said again. "Please."

Randy stared right at her but didn't speak. I felt Allen's hand settle on my shoulder. It suddenly seemed as if we had all gathered for this one moment. Except moment was the wrong word, because what I felt was an absence of the temporal, as if the mountains had shut us off not only from the rest of the world but from time.

"Don't do it," Ronny said to his twin.

Randy reached out for his tank. "Got to," he said.

Ronny picked up his mask. "I'm going in too," Ronny said.

"No, I need you on shore."

Randy put on his flippers and mask and stepped into the water.

"The rope," Ronny said, and flung one end to his twin.

Randy grabbed the rope and tied a single quick knot as he waded into the pool. He inserted his mouthpiece and leaned into the water. One black fin broke the surface and he was gone.

Walter Phillips's walkie-talkie crackled and I heard Earl Wilkinson's voice announcing the river was at two feet.

"We're still okay," Brennon said, his eyes fixed not on the pool but on the dam. For the first time his voice sounded tentative. "We got a few more minutes."



I looked at the dam. The water was no longer a foot from the top but inches.

I jerked my shoulder free from Allen's hand.

"Get him out." I yelled at Ronny. "Right now!"

Ronny turned to us. He stood in the shallows, the rope in his left hand. For a moment I didn't think he heard me. Then he began quickly pulling in the slack.

"Two minutes," Brennon shouted at Ronny. "Give him two more minutes and we'll have her out."

I turned back to the dam, trying to will it to stay up until Randy was out. Something seemed to buckle slightly on both ends, then just as quickly stabilize.

You imagined that, I told myself. It didn't give any.

And then I knew it had.

As the middle section collapsed, the other two folded in like playing cards. A wave broke over Wolf Cliff Falls. People downstream scrambled up banks as an explosion of water surged past. Up on the cliff the river rats didn't yet realize that Randy hadn't gotten out. They began to cheer.

Ronny pulled on the rope, his neck veins bulging as he dug his feet in sand and leaned backward. For a few moments the rope stretched taut between the pool and shore. Then the rope whipped out of the water like a broken fishing line.

Ronny fell backward, landing on his back, his head hitting as well. He got up slowly, sand on his wet suit, his palms seared by rope burns. Then he was stumbling down the river edge shouting for his brother. He searched fifty yards downstream before he turned and ran back toward the pool.

When Luke's group saw the rope they quit cheering. They knew as well as anyone present what it meant. The people downstream realized something terrible had happened as well. The explosion of water had drenched some of them. Knees and elbows had been scraped raw by rocks and sand. Children screamed. A woman clutched her forearm against her stomach. Walter Phillips stood among them, the walkie-talkie pressed to the side of his face as he gave directions to EMS.

Brennon had not moved. He stared where the dam had been, as if it were still there and everything he'd just witnessed a mere hallucination. The Kowalskys stood beside him. Herb Kowalsky stared at where the dam had been as well, but his wife's eyes were on the pool. She raised a tissue to the bridge of her nose and wiped away a tear.

"It should have held," Brennon said, more to himself than the Kowalskys. He turned to the Kowalskys. "It should have held," he said again. Only then did Brennon move, sending his men into the shallows to look for Randy. Wading in himself as well.

Allen still stood behind me, but I didn't turn or reach my hand back to grasp his.

Ronny was in the pool's tailwaters, looking for bubbles. There were none, though the white water would have made them hard to see. He ran to where his gear lay and strapped on his tank before Sheriff Cantrell and Hubert McClure pinned him to the ground.

Ellen Kowalsky stepped into the pool, water covering her shoes and rising to her shins. Allen waded out and turned her

away from the falls. His hand rested lightly on her elbow as they moved slowly, almost ceremoniously, back to shore. The crumpled tissue fell from her hand. It looked like a dogwood blossom as it drifted toward the pool's center, then sank.

## CHAPTER 9

Randy's tank had thirty minutes of oxygen. After forty-five minutes, Sheriff Cantrell told Hubert McClure to unlock the handcuffs on Ronny's wrists.

"Maybe this should have been your call," Cantrell said, turning to Walter Phillips, "but I did what I thought best."

"I've got no problems with that," Phillips said.

"You should have let me try," Ronny screamed, jerking his wrists free from the metal. The cuffs clattered against the rocks at his feet. "Neither one of you had any right to stop me."

"And have three bodies in there?" Sheriff Cantrell said. "No, thanks."

Most everyone had left now. A few reporters lingered, but they were having trouble getting anyone to talk.

"I can't believe this happened," Allen said, breaking the silence between us. Like me, he wanted to believe it hadn't happened, couldn't have happened. He wanted to believe there was still some possibility, no matter how remote, that Randy might yet emerge alive from the pool.

Brennon and his crew had spread the dam's middle section across a sandbar. They studied and pointed as if it were a military map for an upcoming battle. In a way it was, for Brennon was already planning for the next morning. No one but his crew listened. The Kowalskys had gone back to their motel in Seneca. Walter Phillips stood yards away with Ronny and Sheriff Cantrell.

"I need to speak to Phillips a minute," Allen said.

"I'm going to the car," I said.

"I'll just be a minute."

"I can't stay here another minute," I said and made my way across river rocks to the trail end.

The sun had made the ascent less slick than the coming down, but several times I grabbed rhododendron and mountain laurel to keep my balance. The car was unlocked. I got in and stared through the windshield at shapes left by the breeze, the way there was first a space between leaves and then not.

Ten minutes passed and still no sign of Allen. I wrote a note that I was walking back to the motel and left it on the seat. I walked fast, and soon the thin mountain air quickened

my breathing. I tripped on a root and turned my ankle but kept going.

I was almost to the blacktop when Allen pulled alongside and opened the passenger door. I kept walking, the open door matching my pace.

"Please get in," he said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because we're in this together."

Allen put his foot on the brake and waited until I'd sat down and closed the door.

"They're meeting down there at ten tomorrow morning," Allen said, releasing the brake.

"Why?" I asked.

"Brennon is wanting to try again."

"Who does he think he can get into that pool, Ronny? Joel?"

"He's talking about flying some former navy SEAL in from Illinois. Brennon believes he knows what caused the dam to collapse today. He says a few minor adjustments and the dam will be 'viable.' "

"Brennon believes he knows," I said, repeating Allen's words back to him. "And Phillips is going to let him try after what happened today?"

"Who knows the politics of this?" Allen said, frustration in his voice as well. "Who knows what Luckadoo or Senator Jenkins or the damn governor for that matter will tell Phillips to do?"

A half mile up, the two-lane asphalt darkened with recent rain. The tires shushed and whispered.

I spoke only after we parked in the motel lot.

"I'm going to lie down in my room," I told Allen.

"You can do that on my bed."

"No. I want to be alone awhile."

"I'll be in my room," Allen said. "You change your mind, come there."

Allen took my hand and didn't seem to want to let go. I freed myself from his grip.

"We're going to have to talk about this, Maggie," Allen said.

"Not now," I said, and went inside.

I closed the curtains and found an easy-listening station on the radio. I didn't undress, just lay down on the bedsheets and tried not to think. My head hurt, but there were no aspirin in my purse. I did not close my eyes because I knew I would see Randy's flipper disappearing into the pool.

The radio did no good so I turned it off.

Think about something else besides today, I told myself, and I cast my memory out like a fishing line.

I was eight years old. Ben and I wore our Sunday clothes, though it was a Thursday afternoon. We were at our Grandfather Holcombe's farm. He was in heaven, the grown-ups said, though Ben and I knew better because we'd peeked in the box. When we'd eaten our fill of fried chicken and banana pudding, we sneaked off from the adults and went down to the bridge that crossed Licklog Creek. We lay on the gray splintery boards, our foreheads pressed to the slats. Water spiders skimmed the surface as salamanders bellied across the sandy bottom. A snake unspooled on the bank and crossed the pool before disappearing into a clump of reeds.

My grandfather is dead, I had thought to myself as I looked into the pool, then whispered the same words as my mouth pressed against the wood.

And now, twenty years later, I remembered something I had forgotten—my father stepping through the barbed wire in his suit. Ben and I expected to be punished, since we'd been warned never to go near streams or ponds without a grown-up.

"You all know better than to come down here alone," Daddy said, but his words were gentle. "It would near about kill your daddy if one of his babies was to get hurt." He'd lifted us up into his arms and walked upstream to the cow guard and then to the truck where Momma waited.

I LAY ON THE BED A FEW MORE MINUTES BEFORE I GOT UP AND showered. I let hot water beat against my neck and back till the bathroom became a sauna. I felt the sweat bead all over my body like another layer of skin. I didn't want to leave that shower, but after twenty minutes the water began to cool. I got dressed and went to Allen's room.

The door was unlocked. Allen lay on his bed, the only light coming through the gap in the curtains. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness I saw a lampshade on the floor, jagged pieces of the lamp itself scattered close by.

I looked outside and saw the late-afternoon sky was cloudless. If they could have just waited a day, maybe just a few hours, I thought.

I closed the curtain and lay down beside Allen.

"Some of those children in the café," Allen said. "They were his children, weren't they?"

"Yes. A girl and a boy."

Allen pressed the back of his hand to his forehead, as if shielding his face from a blow.

"How old are they?" he asked, his voice slightly muffled by his forearm.

"Sheila's four. Gary is seven."

"If I could have even imagined it could turn out this way. . . ."

"You couldn't," I said. "But I'm not so sure I can say that for myself. Joel knew it could happen, and Randy and Ronny knew too. What they knew I should have known, did know."

"You warned them," Allen said.

"I warned them too late."

Allen but his arm under my neck and turned me toward him. "He was a good father to those children, wasn't he?"

"From everything I know, yes, he was."

"A better father than I was," Allen said. He pulled me closer.

We pressed ourselves against each other, into each other. For a moment I thought of undressing, of putting my hand on the back of Allen's head and leading his mouth to my flesh.

But I also thought of what it would feel like afterward—the smell of sex on our bodies, tangled sheets, late-afternoon light slanting through the window.

Perhaps we might transcend everything that had happened that day, and there might be enough lingering afterward to hearten us through the rest of the day and night. But there

was also the possibility that the temporary distraction would be just that—temporary—and so much the sadder for its transience. Then the room would only feel emptier, the space between Allen and me, between ourselves and our own hearts, wider.

I wasn't ready for us to take that risk, not yet.

I kissed Allen lightly on the mouth.

"I need to go," I said.

"Don't," Allen said, then mashed his lips roughly against mine. His fingers tried to loosen the metal button on my jeans. I jerked my mouth free from his.

"No," I said, the tone of my words harsh. I laid my palms against Allen's chest and pushed. Like a puppet suddenly unstrung, his whole body gave way. He rolled on his back.

"Oh, God. I'm sorry, Maggie," he whispered.

I rubbed a finger across my upper lip. No blood, but it would be swollen. I got off the bed. For a few moments I stood there hoping one of us might find some word or gesture that would make things right again. But none came.

I walked over to the door and put my hand on the knob. I let go and turned toward the bed.

"Are you going to the meeting tomorrow?"

"Yes," he said. "Why not? I've seen it through this far. I owe it to someone, I'm just not sure who."

"I'll go with you," I said.

I looked out the window a last time, the sun lower in the sky but the sky still blue. Just a few more hours.

"Do you want me to open the curtains?"

"No," Allen said. "Leave them closed."

...

I DID NOT GO BACK TO MY ROOM. INSTEAD, I LEFT THE MOTEL and walked the half mile to Billy's store. I stepped onto the porch and opened the screen door. Wanda sat on a stool behind the counter. The boys knelt beside the drink box building a cabin with Lincoln logs.

"Maggie," Wanda said, when I came in. It was a perfunctory greeting.

I crossed the store to the second row of shelves and picked up a bottle of aspirin.

"One forty-eight," Wanda said, when I placed the bottle on the counter. She took the dollar bills from my hand without looking at me and opened the cash register.

"Where's Billy tonight?" I asked.

Wanda looked at me then. "He's gone over to see Jill Moseley and the children. See if there's anything he can do for them."

The boys heard the harshness in their mother's voice. They stopped building and looked up at her, then at me.

"You know of anything I can do to help out?"

"No," Wanda said. "We'll do what can be done."

The register made a clapping sound as Wanda shoved it closed.

"This ain't Columbia," Wanda said. "We still look after our own."

"I grew up here," I said. "I know that."

Wanda checked to make sure the boys had resumed playing. "Then you know what I mean when I say we look after

our own. We look after our neighbors before we look after people who come here and tell us to our faces we're stupid hillbillies. We look after our own fathers before we worry about the father of someone we've never met."

Wanda gave me my change, dropping it in my hand so our flesh didn't touch.

"Goodbye, Wanda," I said.

I walked back to the room and took two aspirin, then picked up the phone. He answered on the third ring.

"You've heard about Randy, I guess."

"Yes, Margaret called me," Daddy said, his voice guarded.

"I was there when it happened."

"I know that too."

Daddy paused. A vacuum cleaner roared to life in the hall outside my door, and I cupped the receiver closer to my ear.

"Margaret said Reverend Tilson will have a service of sorts on the river come morning."

"Where on the river?" I asked.

"There at Wolf Cliff."

"That's not an easy place to get to, even after the bulldozers," I said. "And it's slippery."

"Randy's momma and wife want it there. I reckon Reverend Tilson feels he's got to do what they ask. I'd go if I thought I could walk back out once I got down in there, but that chemotherapy's taken the starch out of me."

"You're feeling worse?" I asked.

"No worse than what the doctors said I'd feel. It ain't nothing I wasn't expecting."

In my mind I followed the telephone lines up Highway 76

and through pasture and orchard edge, down Damascus Church Road, then across the pasture to where my father sat in his front room, the glassed photographs of his wife and children staring down on him.

"About last week," I said, and paused. What I wanted to say was I was sorry, sorry for a lot of things.

But the words wouldn't come. Because I was imagining how Wanda or Jill Moseley would react to my words, how they'd be justified in saying it was a damn convenient time for me to be so suddenly forgiving. Daddy could say much the same.

"You told me what you believed," he said, petulance sharpening his voice. "You got what you think of me out in the open."

The vacuum cleaner shut off. I could hear it being rolled farther up the hall.

"I want things better between us," I said.

"You haven't much acted like it," Daddy said. "That's what I've been trying to do ever since you been up here."

Anger sparked inside me for a moment but didn't catch. I was too weary to nurture it.

"I'm going to try harder," I said.

Daddy said nothing for a few moments. "I'm sorry you were there today," he said. "I'd have wished it otherwise."

"I know that," I said, and told him good night.

I slept that night, more than I thought possible. I woke once and the radio clock glowed two-twenty. I wondered if Allen was awake. I thought how nice it would be if I were lying with his chest pressed into my back, his knees tucked behind

mine. A breeze ruffled the curtains. Crickets and tree frogs gave voice to the weeds and branches. I'd often had trouble sleeping well in Laurens and Columbia and always assumed the reason was the sound of cars passing, neighbors shutting doors and dragging trash cans to the curb, but now I realized it was also what I didn't hear—rain on a tin roof, crickets, tree frogs, owls, whippoorwills—sounds so much a part of the night you didn't even notice them until they were absent.

I thought about the words I'd almost said to Daddy. "What can be spoken is already dead in the heart," Luke had often said. Nietzsche. I didn't believe that was always true. But words could be easy, mere movements of the mouth. As I lay there trying to articulate what I felt toward Daddy, toward myself, the words rang hollow—hollow and self-serving.

Eventually I sank back into sleep. I dreamed of a face staring up at me from the bottom of the pool at Wolf Creek Falls. The water was murky but it slowly began to clear, the face becoming more and more familiar.

REVEREND TILSON HAD AGED SINCE I'D SEEN HIM LAST, IN large part because of the heart attack he'd suffered in December. New lines creased his face; the slump in his shoulders was more pronounced. He had been an energetic man who rarely stayed behind the pulpit when he preached. Instead, he'd roamed the aisles, Bible in hand, still only when reading a passage. On summer Sundays he wore no suit or tie but preached in a white short-sleeve dress shirt and his one suit's black pants. Sweat soaked his shirt, sticking to his skin like

gauze to a wound. When I was twelve he carried me in his arms into the Tamasee. I had felt his biceps tense against my back as he'd eased me into the water.

"You're a child of God now," he told me, as I'd come sputtering out of the water, "and ever always you will be."

Now, sixteen years later, he paused between each step as if uncertain the ground would support him. His son helped him down the trail to where the rest of the congregation gathered on the shore below Wolf Cliff Falls, but once on the bank he walked alone to the water's edge. He turned his back to the falls and faced his congregation.

At the angle where I stood, I recognized faces I'd known since childhood, some of them belonging to relatives. Some returned my gaze, and their eyes made it clear they knew I'd played a role in their gathering here this morning. Jill Moseley and her mother-in-law stood in the center, the rest of the church members huddled around them. Only Ronny did not wear his church clothes, dressed instead in a black T-shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes. His children were not present, nor were Randy's.

Upstream, Sheriff Cantrell and Walter Phillips stood where the dam had been built. To the left of Sheriff Cantrell lay Ronny's wet suit, tank, and flippers. Up on the ridge across the river, Luke sat by himself. He wore what he'd worn yesterday. I knew he, like Hubert McClure, had stayed here all night.

Reverend Tilson bowed his head.

"Lord, hear our prayers this morning. Let not our hearts be troubled in this trying time," he said, his voice still strong.

"Let us know you are with us this morning, Lord, in our time of trial. Amen."

"Amen," the congregation echoed.

Reverend Tilson raised his head.

"Let us pray individually now. Let the Lord know our hearts, our needs at this troubled time. Any so moved speak now."

"I'll be back in a few minutes," I told Allen, and lifted up my backpack. I walked up the trail as Agnes Moseley prayed for her son's soul.

I soon left the trail and made my way to the cave. I clicked on the flashlight as I entered and felt again its cool moistness. I swept the light in front of my feet and in a few minutes came to the campfire. Beside it lay marbles and a toy train Aunt Margaret had bought Ben when he was still in the hospital. Soft drink cans and candy wrappers lay on the cave floor as well.

And a paint set, left open, a brush lying beside it. I shined the light on the cave wall.

The stick figure was still on the wall, but now three other ones had joined it, one the same size and two larger. Their arms too were upraised. The face of the original figure was now smudged black, not by paint but ashes. The second figure was smudged as well, not on the face but on one arm and one leg. The larger figures were unmarked but one arm of each connected to an arm of a smaller figure. All four faces looked upward, and tears of white paint fell from their eyes.

I sat down on the floor. I cut off the flashlight and put my head on my knees. I didn't want to see or be seen.



After a while I got up and walked back down to the river. The last of the individual prayers were being offered when I rejoined Allen.

"Sister Lusk, will you sing for us?" Reverend Tilson said, when no one else raised a hand to pray.

Aunt Margaret nodded and took a step forward. Hours spent in her garden had tanned her arms and face. She seemed to have grown stronger with age. She and my father looked less alike now than any time in their lives. But her eyes were my father's eyes, the same shade of dark blue. My eyes as well.

She had sung at tent revivals and weddings and funerals since her teen years and had accepted invitations to sing as far away as West Virginia. In 1985 the Smithsonian had recorded her for its folksingers collection. But Aunt Margaret always said singing for family and friends was what meant the most to her.

She looked my way and nodded, her face as open and generous as it had always been. She began to sing.

*Shall we gather at the river,  
Where bright angel feet have trod,  
With its crystal tide forever  
Flowing by the throne of God?*

*Yes, we'll gather at the river,  
The beautiful, the beautiful river;  
Gather with the saints at the river  
That flows by the throne of God.*

On the ridge above me I heard voices. Through the trees I saw Brennon and his crew bringing down their equipment. Herb Kowalsky trailed them. His wife was not with him but a man carrying an oxygen tank and duffel bag was. On the other side Luke no longer sat alone. Carolyn and several others had joined him.

*Soon we'll reach the shining river.  
Soon our pilgrimage will cease.*

My aunt's voice echoed off Wolf Cliff. I looked at Ronny and tried to remember the last time I'd seen him without his brother beside him.

*Yes, we'll gather at the river,  
The beautiful, the beautiful river;  
Gather with the saints at the river  
That flows by the throne of God.*

"Thank you, Sister Lusk," Reverend Tilson said, as Brennon's crew dropped what they'd carried on the shore. Brennon led his men back up the trail to get the rest of the equipment, leaving Kowalsky and the diver behind.

Walter Phillips stepped closer to the trail.

"Mr. Brennon," Phillips said, but Brennon did not turn around. "We haven't had our meeting yet, Mr. Brennon," Phillips said. "Nobody's going to do anything until I'm positive what happened yesterday can't happen again."

Brennon turned. "You heard what Luckadoo said on the

phone last night," he said, and continued up the trail, his men following. Kowalsky and the diver did not join Sheriff Cantrell and Phillips but stayed at the trailhead.

When the gorge grew quiet again, Reverend Tilson opened a tattered Bible bound by black electrician's tape.

"The word of the Lord," he said, and began to read.

"Behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow. And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men. And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear ye not: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen.' "

Reverend Tilson closed his Bible. He stepped into the shallows until water rose to his calves.

"Christ rose that we all might rise," he said, waving the Bible over the water. "Randy Moseley, our brother in Christ, may be in that river, but if God wills it he will rise from it this morning and be among us."

Jill Moseley held on to Ronny's arm as she slowly pressed her knees into the sand one at a time. Others knelt as well.

"Raise him, Lord," Wallace Eller shouted.

Allen leaned toward me, his hand pressing my arm. "Do they really believe their prayers can resurrect him?"

"Yes," I said. "They do."

"Raise his soul, Lord," Reverend Tilson shouted, "as you have promised. And we would ask more, Lord, for you to raise his body from this river so his family may see him a last time."

"Please, Lord," Jill Moseley prayed, eyes closed, voice fervent. Her face and arms were uplifted, and the late-morning sun lay like a palm of light across her forehead.

"He was baptized in this river, Lord," Reverend Tilson said. The old man stooped so the fingers of his left hand touched the water that swirled over his ankles. "I've lifted him from this river in my own arms and in Thy name. I'm too old to lift him, Lord. You must lift him from these waters now."

Reverend Tilson pointed his dripping hand toward the hydraulic. "And this child who lies with him, given the name Ruth by her parents, a Godly name, Lord. Raise her too, body and soul into the light." Everyone in the congregation knelt now except Ronny and Reverend Tilson.

I knelt as well. Allen hesitated, then pressed his knees into the sand beside me.

"Hear our prayers, Lord," Reverend Tilson said, "as we make our individual petitions to You on this riverbank. Hear us, Lord. Amen."

"Amen," the congregation answered, and dispersed into groups of three and four to kneel together and hold hands, their prayers blending with the sound of the river. Allen helped me to my feet.

Ronny walked upstream, neither nodding nor speaking as he passed in front of Allen and me. He didn't speak to anyone else, either. He found a spot between Kowalsky and Phillips. Ronny crouched, not as though to pray but as he would in his orchard, hips touching the backs of his calves but not the ground while he rocked slightly on his heels.

"What's he doing?" Allen asked.

"Making sure he's part of whatever is going to happen," I said.

In a few minutes Brennon and his men came back down the trail with the remainder of their equipment. Kowalsky and the diver joined them, as did Sheriff Cantrell and Ronny and Walter Phillips.

"So what do you want to meet about?" Brennon asked Phillips, not looking at Phillips as he spoke but at his men checking the equipment.

Walter Phillips looked weary beyond his years. If he'd slept at all last night it had been very little. I wondered if what had kept him awake was frustration, stress, or, perhaps, guilt. Maybe he had someone he could confide in, a close friend or relative, but that person was not in Oconee County. This morning he was seemingly alone.

"I want to know why I should believe this dam of yours will work any better today than it did yesterday," Walter Phillips asked.

"The water's lower today," Brennon answered brusquely. "Wilkinson said it's down to one point five." He gestured toward the river. "Look how clear it is compared to yesterday."

"If that dam can't hold up at one point eight," Phillips asked, "why should I believe it can hold up at one point five?"

"We're wasting time here," Brennon said. "It may start raining again."

"We're not rushing this," Phillips said, and as he spoke I looked at his hands and saw they were clinched as they'd been in my photograph. His shoulders seemed to widen slightly, his

stomach tightening as if preparing to receive a blow. Or maybe deliver one.

"He puts it up, I'll go in," Ronny said and pointed to Brennon's diver. "He don't have to go. It's my brother in there. I'll take the risk."

"I'm not afraid to try it," Brennon's diver said, as much to Ronny as Phillips.

"Then we'll both go in," Ronny said.

Walter Phillips spoke softly, so softly no one seemed at first to understand what he had said.

"What did you say?" Herb Kowalsky asked.

"I said nobody's going in. That dam's not going up, not until I've got good reason to believe it will hold."

"You can't do this," Brennon said. His face flushed with anger. "You heard what Luckadoo said last night. He said if I was confident the dam would work to go ahead. He didn't say you. He said me."

"Luckadoo isn't here," Walter Phillips said. "This is going to be my call."

At that moment I knew Walter Phillips might well be kissing whatever career he hoped to have with the Forest Service goodbye. I suspected he understood this as well, and tomorrow or ten or thirty years from now he could conceivably look back with regret on this moment.

"You can't do this," Herb Kowalsky said, but the dejected tone in his voice argued that he knew Phillips could. And had.

Brennon looked at his men for a moment. They had stopped unpacking equipment. Their eyes were on their employer, waiting for instructions.

Brennon turned his gaze back to Phillips.

"What if we go ahead and decide we're going to build that dam anyway? What are going to do about it?"

"Stop you," Walter Phillips said.

I looked at the polished black holster on his hip. Walter Phillips had probably taken his gun from that holster a few times on the job. He looked at Brennon, and his eyes, like his voice, revealed no fear or even nervousness, only resolve.

Brennon turned to Sheriff Cantrell.

"Whose side are you on?"

Sheriff Cantrell nodded at Phillips.

"His."

Sheriff Cantrell raised his voice so Brennon's crew could hear him. "And so is my deputy. If one of your men so much as dips his toe in that river I'll lock him and you both up."

"You've no right to do this, Sheriff," Herb Kowalsky said, "no more right than Phillips does."

"I'll worry about what rights I got, Mr. Kowalsky," Sheriff Cantrell said. "I'm sorry about your daughter, I really am, but one man has already died trying to get her out. I'll not let that river kill another."

"This is going to cost you your job," Brennon said to Sheriff Cantrell.

Sheriff Cantrell smiled at Brennon.

"Sheriff's an elected office in Oconee County, Mr. Brennon, and we don't tend to get many write-in votes from Illinois."

"I'm calling Luckadoo soon as I get back to the motel," Brennon said. He motioned to his men to begin picking up the gear.

I waited for Kowalsky to make further threats himself, but the face he'd worn at the meetings and on the river fell away like a discarded mask. He looked like his wife when she'd spoken at the community center. Something had broken inside him now as well, or maybe, up until now, he'd just been able to hide that break beneath his anger and indignation. He did not follow Brennon and his crew up the trail. Instead, he walked ten yards downstream and sat on a rock. I wondered if he was pondering what he would tell his wife. Or perhaps merely delaying those words a few minutes longer.

Ronny started walking upstream.

"You best leave that diving equipment where it is, Ronny," Sheriff Cantrell said. "I'm going to hold on to it for a few days."

Ronny did not acknowledge Sheriff Cantrell's words, but he didn't try to pick up his diving gear either. He was walking toward Reverend Tilson's service when he suddenly turned and backtracked to the trail. He followed the last of Brennon's men up the ridge.

"Where do you think he's going?" Phillips asked.

"I don't know," Sheriff Cantrell said, "but the farther from here the better."

Reverend Tilson and his congregation continued to pray in groups of three and four. The murmur of prayers merged with the sound of the river. It's Sunday morning, I thought, as though somehow I'd not realized that. Sunday morning in a place where it meant more than sleeping late and a leisurely read of the Sunday paper.

Sunlight poured into the gorge now, warming the rocks,

brightening the river. Yellow mayflies swirled over the pool below Wolf Cliff Falls, the females dipping occasionally to lay their eggs. A trout broke the pool's surface. In the woods behind me a pileated woodpecker tapped a tree trunk as if sending a coded message. The morning felt like spring in a way the previous days here had not. The Tamasee and its banks seemed more alive, busier. I looked at the rhododendron and mountain laurel. They would blossom soon and the flowers would overwhelm the banks with their intense whites and pinks.

Herb Kowalsky still sat on the rock farther upstream. He looked diminished. He was not a likable man, and he must have been a hard man to work for, maybe to live with as well, but at that moment I wanted to be more generous to him. I wanted to believe that he had been as attentive to his daughter in life as in death. I wanted him to have that—despite whatever sorrow or guilt he felt—to know beyond any doubt he had been a good father to his daughter.

Allen reached his arm around my waist.

"Phillips is doing the right thing."

"Yes, he is," I said. "I just hope his superiors see it that way."

"What will happen now?"

"That depends on whether Phillips gets any backing. Come July the river will be more rock than water. They shouldn't have any trouble getting into the undercut then."

"You think they'll be willing to wait that long?"

"I don't know."

Someone was coming down the trail, moving quickly. I turned around, expecting Brennon or one of his crew, but it

was Ronny, a backpack slung over his shoulder. He cut off the trail and shoved through mountain laurel till he reached the tailwaters of the pool.

"What are you doing, son?" Reverend Tilson asked, as Ronny waded into the shallows. Reverend Tilson took a few tentative steps after him. "What are you doing, son?" he repeated.

"Get out of there, Moseley." Sheriff Cantrell shouted.

No one moved as Ronny opened the backpack and pulled out three sticks of dynamite, gray masking tape binding them together like a bouquet.

Luke reacted first, running down the ridge as Ronny flared a cigarette lighter. It took him three tries to light the fuse. Sheriff Cantrell and Walter Phillips and Hubert McClure stood at the pool edge now, but they didn't enter the water.

"Don't do it," Sheriff Cantrell said.

"It's what has to be done," Ronny said, and waded deeper into the pool, raising the dynamite in his left hand as the water rose to his chest.

Reverend Tilson raised his hand as though to make a pronouncement as Luke crashed through the last thicket of mountain laurel and onto the rocks at the pool's edge. Like the rest of us he could only watch as Ronny heaved the dynamite into the right side of the falls.

Ronny turned and started wading out as Sheriff Cantrell and Walter Phillips backed away from the pool. Allen tried to pull me toward the woods, but I refused to move.

"Turn your head," Allen shouted at me, but my eyes were on Luke. He'd dived into the pool and was swimming

underwater toward the falls. He was going after the dynamite. Maybe to snuff the fuse. Maybe to use his body to shield the river.

Everything was quiet, so quiet I thought I could hear the fuse sizzling under the water.

Then the ground beneath my feet shook and the pool heaved upward like a geyser.

Reverend Tilson stood in the shallows, his white shirt drenched. One of the women in his congregation screamed. The back of Ronny's neck was bleeding. Sheriff Cantrell and Walter Phillips took him by the arms and set him down on a sandbar.

Walter Phillips knelt beside Sheriff Cantrell, blocking my view.

"How bad is it?" he asked.

"I think he's okay," Sheriff Cantrell said.

Luke was staggering back to the opposite shore, his face bloody. Carolyn placed her hand on his shoulder to steady him.

Reverend Tilson was still in the shallows, his hand still upraised. He stared at something in the pool.

"Oh, God," Herb Kowalsky said.

Then I saw what they saw, Randy's and Ruth's bodies rising from the pool's depths into the light.

## CHAPTER 10

After death, everything in a house appears slightly transformed: the color of a vase, the length of a bed, the weight of a glass lifted from a cupboard. No matter how many blinds are raised and lamps turned on, light is dimmer. Shadows that cobweb corners spread and thicken. Clocks tick a little louder, the silence between seconds longer. The house itself feels off-plumb, as though its foundation had been calibrated to the weight and movement of the deceased.

So it seems to me on this October afternoon as I box up my father's clothes. Everything and everyone else has been dealt with: the horse and the cow given to Joel; the truck donated to Luke's Forest Watch Project; paperwork done at the courthouse, pictures and a few other heirlooms I'm taking

with me packed in the Toyota's trunk; Tony Bryan, who wrongly assumed that Ben and I planned to sell.

After two months I am returning to Columbia.

"Don't worry about your job," Lee had assured me in August. "It'll be here. You take care of your father."

And so I had, in this room where I had emptied bedpans and urinals instead of drawers, lifted pain pills and cough syrup to his mouth and what food and liquid he could swallow, bathed him with a sponge and washtub and afterward rubbed Desitin into his skin. The window is open, as it has been most of the last week, but the smell of stale sweat and urine linger.

Only a portion of what's in the drawers is worth giving to Goodwill. Some jeans and work pants, some blue socks and a white dress shirt still wrapped in cellophane, two sweaters, a couple of belts. That's it. The T-shirts stained gray with sweat, socks and overalls frayed at heels and knees, underwear and handkerchiefs—all these will be put in a dumpster.

I carry the two boxes out to the car. I shove them into the backseat, turn and gaze across the pasture to Damascus Pentecostal Church, the snagged rows of stone rising beside it. The grave is easy to spot, an unseasonable blossom of flowers set among a swell of black dirt. A grave dug by Joel and Billy, because, as Wanda Watson once reminded me, "we take care of our own up here."

I hear a crackling of gravel and see Aunt Margaret walking up the drive, one hand clutching a shawl around her neck, in the other a dead man's mail.

"You need something besides a T-shirt on, girl," she says. "It's October, not July."

I nod at the house.

"I've been inside. Anyway, filling and hauling these boxes is enough work to keep me warm."

Aunt Margaret hands me the mail.

"Nothing but advertisements far as I can tell," she says, as I stuff it in the pocket of my jeans. "I got my chores done, so thought I might could help you."

"I'm about done," I say. "One more box load and I'll be on my way."

"When will you be back?"

"Not before Thanksgiving. I've got some serious catching up to do at work."

Aunt Margaret meets my eyes. "What about in the romance department? You got some catching up there as well?"

"Maybe," I say, smiling. "Let's just say I still like the smell of him."

She smiles too. "That's more than just some old wives' tale, girl. There's a whole lot of worse ways to measure a man."

Aunt Margaret looks at the house and lets her gaze linger a few moments. I wonder if, like me, it seems somehow different now. When she turns back to me, tears dampen her cheeks.

"I'll say my goodbye now," she says, "so you can say your own."

Aunt Margaret pulls me to her. I smell the Ivory soap she bathes with, the talcum powder she brushes on her skin each

morning and night. She holds me hard, like she wants to remember exactly how I feel, make an imprint of my body on hers. She knows that though she's in as good health as an eighty-two-year-old woman can expect, at her age each good-bye may be the last. She loosens her hold, though her hands linger on my arms a few moments longer.

"Take good care of yourself, Maggie," she says, reaching into her skirt pocket and pulling out a wad of tissue. "I best go now before I make a scene."

She heads back down the drive, dabbing her eyes with the tissue as she walks.

I go back inside, to fill one more cardboard box with my father's clothes, to say my goodbyes, to close more than just this house before I leave. But it isn't that easy. I would like to say my father and I reconciled in these last months, that as I tended him the past was simply forgotten. But there were times the old grievances resurfaced and the less angelic part of our natures won out. When that happened it was easy enough to believe nothing had really changed between us.

Yet it had. We'd made our tentative, sideways gestures of reconciliation, and they were not always self-serving and they were not always futile. Maybe that was as much as we were capable of, especially in a place where even land turns inward, shuts itself off from the rest of the world.

All that's left is the closet. I open its door and smell moth-balls and the dank, musty odor of clothes shut years in darkness. The faint linger of cigarette smoke as well. I free cotton and flannel shirts from the rattling jumble of clothes hangers, then dig deeper into the closet for two pair of khaki pants, a

heavy winter coat, and a denim work jacket. I stuff them in the cardboard box, then take out the denim jacket and put it on. I stand before the bureau mirror. The sleeves come to my knuckles, the denim loose on my shoulders. Not a good fit, but that seems appropriate. I turn back the sleeves, then lift the last box and carry it outside.

The morning has a cool, clean feel as I drive out Damascus Church Road, and an October sky widens overhead with not a wisp of gray or white cloud, just blue smoothed out like a quilt tacked on a frame. It's a sky that makes everything beneath it brighter, more clarified. I cross the creek and pass bottomland Joel planted in the spring with corn. What stalks remain standing look like something after fire, brittle and singed to an ashy gray, the shriveled shucks clinched close.

The land rises again and I pass Aunt Margaret's house and the church, a pasture, and another cornfield. Then it is only apple orchards, late in the picking season but still some fruit left to dab some red and yellow onto the brown branches. The spring's heavy rains, the rains that had brought me up here in May, have ensured a good harvest.

At the stop sign I turn left, because there is one more place to go before leaving. I pass Billy's store and Luke's cabin, following the land as it leans toward the river. I park on the road's shoulder and walk out until I am at the center of the bridge.

I place my hands on the railing and look down. Poplars and sweet gums hold clutches of gold and purple, but many leaves have already fallen. The thinning foliage makes the river seem wider, as if the banks have been pushed back a few yards on



each side. Enough color remains for a good photograph. My camera is in the front seat of my car, but I let it remain there.

The Tamasee is shallow. Rocks underwater in May now jut above the surface. What was once white water flows slow and clear. Two trout waver in the sandy shallows. Their fins break the surface as they drift a few feet downstream then scuttle back to where the female has used her caudal fin to dig a nest. I can see only their black backs, not the blood-red spots on their flanks or the buttermilk yellow of their bellies.

I hear voices from under the bridge, and in a few moments a yellow raft appears, PROPERTY OF TAMASSEE RIVER TOURS stenciled in black on the side. It's late in the year for a rafting trip, probably some business or church group with enough money to talk Earl Wilkinson into pulling a raft out of storage. They wear yellow life jackets and red, green, and blue helmets. One of the rafters sees me and waves. Earl looks up and our eyes meet. He nods but does not smile. I watch the raft scrape and slide downstream, then through Deep Sluice and past Bobcat Rock. The sun is out and the bright colors refract and merge as I offer a kind of prayer.

A breeze lifts off the river. I raise the jacket's collar and tuck the denim lapels under my chin. In another month all the leaves will be shed. Things hidden will emerge: knotholes and barked stretches of root, mistletoe and squirrel nests in the trees' higher junctions. From this bridge I will be able to follow several of the river's bends and curves as it makes a boundary between two states. Outcrops and rivulets will become more visible. Wildlife as well, mainly deer and wild turkeys but also an occasional wild boar or bobcat, even a

black bear foraging for mast. Possibly a bigger cat, allowing a glimpse of yellow eyes, a long black-tipped tail, before vanishing back into the realm of faith.

From this bridge I cannot see the pool below Wolf Cliff, but I know the water is low and clear, the shallows thickened by red and yellow and purple leaves. Perhaps trout spawn in those shallows, their fins stirring the leaves as they follow old urgings.

In the boulder-domed dark below the falls, no current slows or curves in acknowledgment of Ruth Kowalsky and Randy Moseley's once-presence, for they are now and forever lost in the river's vast and generous unremembering.