

Slackwater

An original novel

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Chapter One — The Taking Line

The road into Cane Hollow had been good once, and Cora Tipton could still feel the ghost of that goodness under the truck — the long easy grade her father's wagon used to take at a walk, the place where the creek came close enough to throw spray on the wheel hubs in spring. Now the road was a wound. The government graders had been through to widen it for the hauling trucks and then abandoned it to the rain, and the rain had done what rain does to broken ground. She drove the Model A in second gear, both hands hard on the wheel, and let the ruts decide most of the steering for her.

She had not been up this road in fifteen years. She had promised herself she never would be.

The transit rode beside her on the seat, boxed in oak and strapped down like a thing that might try to leave. Her field book lay on top of it, and on top of the field book her drawing case, and the whole stack shifted and knocked with the truck's lurching, a small wooden conversation she had learned to stop hearing. What she could not stop hearing was the hollow itself coming up to meet her: the particular way the ridges leaned in, the smell of it through the cracked window — leaf rot and cold water and woodsmoke and, under all of it, the river. You could not see the Pigeonroost yet from the road, but she had grown up able to smell its level, and it was high. Higher than September had any business making it. That would be the dam, three miles down, already holding back more than it let go.

She came around the shoulder of Burnt Ridge and there they were.

Stakes. A whole army of them, marching up the valley floor and up the lower slopes in a ragged line, each one a sharpened length of locust two feet proud of the ground, and each one banded near the top with a stripe of red paint the color of a struck thumb. They followed no fence and no field edge. They followed nothing a farmer would recognize. They followed a number — one thousand and sixty-eight feet above a sea none of these people had ever seen — and everything the stakes enclosed below that number was already, in the cold arithmetic of the men who had driven them, water.

The hollow did not know it was a lake yet. The corn shocks still stood in Dewey's bottom field, leaning their tents against the frost. A line of wash hung gray and motionless between two poplars. A dog barked somewhere and another answered it, and the sound traveled the way sound only traveled in this one place on earth, doubling off the ridges so you could never be sure which holler it had come from. All of it under the red line. All of it spoken for.

Cora pulled the truck onto the flat by the ford turnoff and cut the engine, and the silence came in and sat on her chest.

She had thought she was ready for this. She had spent a week in the Coldwater camp office telling herself she was a draftsman and nothing more, that a place was only a set of distances and elevations and corners, that you could put any place at all onto a sheet of linen if you held the alidade steady and trusted the numbers over your own two eyes. She believed that. It was the truest thing she knew, and it had carried her out of these mountains and through three years of night classes in Cincinnati and into a job that paid a woman a man's wage to draw the drowning of the world. She believed it the way her father believed Scripture, which was to say completely, and which was to say she had never once tested it against the thing it was meant to protect her from.

She was testing it now. The numbers were not winning.

She made herself look at the ridge. The house was up there, set back in the laurel where the morning sun would find it last — gray board, a stone chimney her grandfather had laid, a roof her father would have patched himself rather than owe a man for the work. A thread of smoke stood straight up off the chimney into the still air and then bent, all at once, eastward, the way smoke does when the

day decides which way it is going to go. Absalom Tipton was home, then. Of course he was home. The whole valley was being carried off in trucks and her father was at home keeping a fire, refusing to understand that the fire and the hearth and the chimney and the hill it stood on had all, by act of Congress and the rising of the slackwater, ceased to be his.

He was the last name above the line that had not signed. They had told her so in the camp office as if it were a fact about a stranger. *The Tipton parcel*. She had let them believe she could be useful there precisely because she was a stranger, because fifteen years was a long time, because the woman in field trousers with the steady hands and the Cincinnati vowels did not look like anybody's daughter. She had let Wendell Frame think he was clever for sending her. She had let herself think it too.

A crow went over, low, and put its shadow across the windshield, and Cora flinched as though something had touched her.

"All right," she said aloud, to no one, in the voice she used on green rodmen. "All right. It is only ground."

She got down out of the truck. The cold came through her trouser legs at once, the high-country cold that had nothing to do with the calendar, and she stood a moment with one hand on the warm hood and breathed the river smell and let her body remember things her mind had spent fifteen years filing flat. The give of this particular mud. The pitch of the slope under the soles of her feet, steeper than it looked, always steeper than it looked. The taste of woodsmoke that was her mother's woodsmoke and her father's and now somebody's last fire before the trucks came.

She unstrapped the transit and shouldered the tripod and did not look at the ridge again.

There was a stake driven not ten feet from where she had parked, red-banded, fresh — the paint had not yet greyed in the weather. Someone had set it that week. She crouched by it and read the number penciled on the flat that had been shaved, and it was a good clean elevation in a hand she did not know, and below the number, smaller, almost shy, someone had written two more words and then half scratched them out, so that she had to tilt her head to find them in the grain of the wood.

Sealy place, it said.

She had known the Sealys. Everyone had known the Sealys. Their cabin would be — she turned, located herself the old way, by the lean of the ridges rather than by any compass — their cabin would be just there, below her now, in the willows by the slough, and the red band on this stake meant that the willows and the slough and the cabin and the people in it sat eight, ten feet under the line. Under the water that was not yet water.

She had come up here to measure her father's stubbornness and reduce it to a parcel. She understood, crouched in the cold mud with her thumb on a dead man's elevation, that this was going to be harder than the numbers had promised, and that the numbers had known it all along, and had let her come anyway.

Cora stood, and set the tripod legs into the ground, one, two, three, with the small violences the work required, and began.

She worked the lower flat through the gray of the morning, and the work did what it always did, which was to give her hands a country to live in that was not the country in front of her. She set the transit over the section corner the previous crew had referenced and leveled it with the patience the bubble demanded and sighted the backstake and swung the scope and called the angles to herself and wrote them down. The figures went into the field book in her small upright hand, column after column, the place becoming paper one observation at a time. There was a mercy in it. A theodolite did not care whose willows it was drowning. It asked only to be held still and read true, and Cora had built an entire life out of being the kind of person who could hold a thing still and read it true while the world she was reading came apart.

The frost burned off. The river, when the trees opened and let her see it, was wide and slow and the color of pewter, swollen up over the gravel bars she remembered, lapping at willow roots that had spent a hundred years above the waterline. The backwater. The dam's first reaching. By the look of it the Pigeonroost had already given up being a river in the lower hollow and become the front edge of a lake that did not yet know its own size.

A little after noon she heard the wagon.

She knew it for a wagon before she could see it — the iron tires

on stone, the blow and check of a mule being held to a walk on the grade. She did not turn. She had decided on the drive up that she would not be the one to turn first, not for anybody, that she would be found at her work like a person who belonged to the United States Government and not to this place. So she kept her eye to the scope and her hand on the tangent screw and let the wagon come down the road behind her and slow and stop.

For a while nobody said anything. The mule shifted and breathed. A jay went off in the laurel like a rusty hinge.

"They sent us a Tipton," a man's voice said at last. It was not a question, and it was not unkind, and it was not warm. It was the voice of a man turning something over to see what was wrong with it. "Lord. They sent us one of our own to do it."

Cora straightened from the scope and turned, and the fifteen years fell away and would not stay fallen no matter how she stacked them.

She did not know him at first — a big stooped man on a wagon seat, gray coming up through a brown beard, a coat gone shapeless with use — and then she did, all at once, the way you suddenly read a word you have been staring at. Vester Renfro. Older by a war and a depression. He had kept the store at the mouth of the hollow when she was a girl, had weighed out her mother's coffee and slipped her horehound candy across the counter when Verlie was not looking, had a laugh you could hear from the road. He was not laughing now. He sat with the lines slack in his big hands and looked down at her field trousers and her boxed transit and the red-banded stake by her truck, and he looked at her face the longest, and she watched him do the arithmetic she had hoped a stranger's clothes would prevent.

"Verlie's girl," he said. "Cora." He said her name carefully, like a thing he was handing back to her. "We heard the dam people had a Tipton mapping. I told them down at the store, no. I said, not a one of Absalom's would put the red on their own people. I said that, yesterday, standing in my own store." He shook his head, slow. "And here you are with the little spyglass."

"Mr. Renfro." Her voice came out steadier than she had feared, and that frightened her, how easily it came, the camp-office voice,

the United States Government voice. "It is a transit. Not a spy-glass."

"I know what it is," he said. "I have watched it drink the bottom of this hollow for six months." He gathered the lines. Then he stopped, and looked at her again, and something moved in his weathered face that was worse than anger because it had grief folded all through it. "Your daddy know you are up here?"

The question went into her the way cold water finds a seam in a boot. She had been asking it of herself since Cincinnati, and she had no answer she could say to this man on this road.

"I have work to do at the cemetery," she said, which was true, and which was a coward's answer, and which she heard land between them as exactly that.

Vester Renfro looked at her a moment more. Then he clucked to the mule, and the wagon lurched, and the iron tires took up their grinding on the stone, and he went on down the doomed road toward whatever he had left to carry out of his store, and he did not say goodbye, and he did not look back. Cora stood by her transit in the noon light with her true and steady hands hanging useless at her sides and understood that she had not come home a stranger after all. There were no strangers here. The hollow had drawn her map fifteen years ago and filed it away, and all her distances and elevations only confirmed where she had always been: below the line, with the rest of them, in the part the water was going to take.

She bent back to the scope because it was the only thing she knew how to do. But she had to wait a long moment, eye to the glass, for the crosshair to stop trembling against the far red stake, and she told herself it was the cold.

Chapter Two — Renfro's

By the next morning the camp had decided what to do with her, and what the camp decided arrived, as it always did, in the person of Junior Sealy.

He was waiting outside the commissary at first light when she came down with her gear — a long-boned boy of twenty-two in a canvas coat too big for him and a cap pushed back off a face that had not yet made up its mind whether to be a man's. He had a level rod over one shoulder like a soldier's rifle and a bundle of stakes under the other arm and a can of red paint hooked on two fingers, and he was eating a biscuit, and he stopped eating it when he saw her, and stood up straighter, and then seemed embarrassed to have done so.

"Miss Tipton." He swallowed. "Mr. Frame put me to you. For the rod and the staking." He hesitated. "I am Junior. Junior Sealy. You will not remember me, I was not but a chap when you —" He stopped. The unfinished sentence hung there, *when you left*, and he had the grace to look at his own boots over having started it.

"Sealy," she said. The willows. The slough. The shaved stake with the half-scratched words. "Your people are in the lower hollow. By the slough."

"Were." He said it plainly, without reaching for her pity, and she respected him for it before she knew she was going to. "We took the buyout in the spring. Daddy bought a piece up on Sawmill Ridge, above the line. It is good ground. Drains poor, but it is good ground, and it is ourn, and it will be there." He shifted the rod on his shoulder. "I drove the stakes on our own place last month. Mr. Frame did not know it was ourn, or I expect he would not have sent me. Or maybe he would. I cannot tell with him." He looked at her, quick, to see if he had said too much. "Anyhow. I can paint

the red. It does not trouble me."

It troubled him. She could see exactly how much it troubled him, the way she had been able to see her own trouble in Vester Renfro's face. But she had learned long ago not to make a person say a thing twice that cost them to say once.

"Then we will get on," she said. "We are starting at the church. The cemetery has to be platted before the removal crew can work it, and the removal crew wants to start there, so the cemetery is first." She heard herself say *the removal crew* and *the cemetery* in the same flat measuring voice, two terms in a column, and she watched the boy hear it too, and she made herself meet his eyes. "It is the worst of the work, Junior. I will not pretend it is not. If you would rather stake fields, I will ask Frame for somebody else."

"No, ma'am." He said it fast. Then, slower, working it out: "If it has got to be done I would as soon it was done by somebody from here. Seems like it ought to be hands that knew the names." He colored. "That sounds foolish."

"It does not," Cora said, and was surprised to find she meant it, and more surprised to find it frightened her — that the boy had said in one breath the thing she had crossed half the country to keep from feeling. *Hands that knew the names*. She turned and stowed the transit in the truck so he would not see her face. "Throw your rod in the back. We will drive up as far as the road holds and walk the rest."

They stopped at Renfro's on the way, because the store sat at the mouth of the hollow where the camp road met the old road, and because the survey had an account there for nails and paint and whatever it ran short of, and because — though Cora did not admit this even to herself until she was standing in the doorway — some animal part of her wanted to put right the thing that had gone wrong on the road the day before, or at least to fail at it in person rather than in memory.

The store was dying. She saw it the moment she came in out of the brightness — the way the shelves had gone gap-toothed, whole sections cleared, the ghost rectangles of removed crates marked in the dust like the foundations of a vanished town. Renfro's had been the heart of the hollow, the one warm crowded room where the

valley came to be a valley: where men argued politics and weather over the cracker barrel, where women traded eggs for thread, where the mail came and the news came and a girl could stand by the stove and listen to the whole world being decided by people who had never been farther than Knoxville. It had smelled of coffee and leather and coal oil and the particular green sourness of the pickle barrel, and it smelled of those things still, faintly, under a new smell of emptiness, of a building learning it would not be needed.

Vester Renfro stood behind the counter wrapping something in brown paper for an old woman Cora did not know, and a couple of men sat by the cold stove not talking, and they all looked up when the bell went, and they all knew her. She felt it travel the room. *Verlie's girl. The one that left. The one with the spyglass.* Junior came in behind her with the paint can, and the recognition shifted and complicated, the valley sorting them — the boy who took the buyout and the woman who drew the line — and finding them both wanting in ways it had not yet decided how to forgive.

"We need a flat of the white lead," Cora said to Renfro, "and lath, if you have it, for grade markers. On the camp account."

"I know what the camp needs." Renfro did not move to fill the order. He finished the old woman's parcel and tied it with string and set it before her gentle as an egg, and the woman gathered it up and went out past Cora without a word, only a long look, and the bell rang her into the brightness and was still.

Then Renfro came around the counter, wiping his hands on his apron, and he was not unkind — that was the thing Cora would remember, that none of them were unkind, that unkindness would have been so much easier to stand against than this. He fetched the lath himself from the back and stacked it on the counter and counted out the cans of lead, and only when it was all done and there was nothing left to do but write it in the account book did he stop and put his two hands flat on the counter and look at her.

"Ila Greer comes in Thursdays," he said. "For her flour and her bit of coffee. She will be in tomorrow." He let it sit. "I tell you so you will know. Whatever it is you have come to do up at Burnt Ridge — and I reckon I know what it is, you have to map the graves before they can dig them up and haul them, I have heard it all said

in this very store till I am sick of it — whatever it is, you will be doing it where Ila can see. And Ila.” He stopped. His big face worked. “Ila has not been right since your brother’s friend went in the river. You would remember that. The Greer boy. You would have been just a chap.”

The store was very quiet. Junior had gone still by the door with the paint can hanging from his fingers. One of the men by the stove turned his head.

“Asa,” Cora said. Her own voice came to her from a long way off, flat and even and absolutely steady, the United States Government voice, the voice that could read a place true while it came apart. “Asa Greer.”

“That is the one.” Renfro nodded slowly, watching her, and she could not tell — she would lie awake that night not able to tell — whether the old man was warning her off something or steering her toward it. “Drowned in the ford the summer of ’21. They buried him up on the ridge, or so it was said, though Ila never would credit it. To this day she will tell you her boy is not in that ground. Tells anybody who will stand for it. Says he is still down at the water, waiting on her.” He shook his head, and the grief came up in his face again, that valley grief that had no bottom. “We let her say it. It is a small thing to let a broke-down woman say. But you go opening graves up on that ridge, missy, and you had best be ready for Ila Greer, because the one thing she has been right about all these years is that nobody ought to be digging.”

Cora became aware that she was holding the edge of the counter. She made her hand let go. She picked up the field book from where she had set it among the cans of lead, and she opened it to the day’s clean page, and she uncapped her pen, and she wrote, in the small upright hand that had carried her out of these mountains, *Burnt Ridge cemetery — plat — begin Greer & Tipton plots*, and the writing of it steadied her the way the writing of things always steadied her, turned the unbearable into a line in a column, and she hated, for one clean cold instant, that it worked.

“Thank you for the warning, Mr. Renfro,” she said. “Put the lath on the account.”

She carried the lead out into the morning with Junior trailing

silent behind her, and she did not let herself look back at the store, and she got into the truck and set the field book on the boxed transit where the day's first entry lay drying — *begin Greer & Tipton plots* — two names she had spent fifteen years keeping in separate columns, set down now in her own hand, side by side, on the same line, the way they had only ever truly been once, on a wet night at the ford that the slackwater was three miles and seventy days from covering for good.

"Miss Tipton?" Junior said, when she had sat too long with the engine off. "You all right?"

"Drive when I tell you to drive," she said, and started the truck, and they went up the road toward the ridge and the graves, and behind them the river went on quietly being a lake.

Chapter Three — Burnt Ridge

The cemetery on Burnt Ridge had no fence the government would recognize, and that was the first trouble. Cora stood at the gate that was only two locust posts and a sag of rusted wire and looked out over the graves and saw, with the part of her mind that had been trained to see it, a drawing problem.

There were perhaps sixty of them, climbing the south shoulder of the ridge in no order a surveyor could love, following instead the older order of who had wanted to lie near whom — families clustered, then drifting, then a single stone off by itself under a cedar where someone had been put on purpose at a distance. Some were marked with cut stone and a name and dates. More were marked with fieldstone, an upright slab of native rock with nothing on it at all, the name kept in the memory of the living and nowhere else. A few were marked only by the long shallow sinking of the ground that told you, if you knew to read it, that something had been let down here and the earth had settled slow over it, drawing a soft gray hollow in the grass.

All of it below the red. She had run the line up from the section corner yesterday with the level rod, and the contour at one thousand and sixty-eight feet crossed the ridge above the topmost graves and below the gate, so that every soul on the hill lay in the part of the world that was going to be water. The dead of Cane Hollow had been laid here, generation on generation, on what their people believed was the safest ground in the valley — high, dry, out of the river's reach — and the river was going to have them anyway. There was a joke in that somewhere, a hard one, and Cora did not let herself finish it.

“Where do you want me,” Junior said.

He had set the level rod against the gatepost and stood with his cap in his hands the way a man stands in a graveyard without being told to, and Cora was glad of it and could not have said why.

“We are drawing a plat today,” she said. “Every grave gets a number and a location tied to the corner, so the removal crew knows where each one is and can match the bones to the name on the consent. No grave moves until it is on the plat.” She set her drawing board across her knees and pinned the linen and uncapped the India ink, and the small ordinary motions settled her, as they were meant to. “You hold the tape. I draw and number. Read me the stone when there is one. When there is not, we put down *unmarked* and the number, and the reverend can tell us later whose it is.”

Junior put his cap back on. “How do you number a person,” he said. It was not quite a question. He was looking at the nearest stone, a child’s, a lamb carved soft on top and gone softer with the weather, the name worn to a shadow. “Seems like they had names already.”

“They did. They do.” Cora kept her eyes on the linen, where the corner monument was already a small precise cross and the first reference line ran out from it true. “The number is for the crew, not for the dead. So nobody gets moved who should not be, and nobody gets lost. It is the only way I know to be careful with them.” She heard the defensiveness and disliked it. “Hold the tape on the lamb stone. That one is grave one.”

They began at the bottom of the hill and worked up, and it went the way the work always went, which was that it became only itself. Junior held the dumb end of the steel tape against each stone and Cora read the distance and the bearing and laid the grave onto the linen as a small open rectangle with a number inside it, neat as a surveyor’s town, and beside it in her column wrote the name when there was a name and *unmarked* when there was not. The hill became paper one grave at a time. There was the mercy in it she had told the boy about and not entirely believed: that you could take a thing too large to hold and reduce it to numbered rectangles and a column of distances, and in the reducing make it

small enough to carry.

The Greer plot was a third of the way up, a loose family of stones under a wild apple gone untended since whoever pruned it died. *Greer. Greer.* A grandmother, a grandfather, two infants under a single shared slab. Cora numbered them and wrote the names and did not let her hand pause over the apple's shadow, and Junior read the stones in his flat careful voice and did not say the name she was waiting for him not to say, because it was not there. There was no Asa Greer in the Greer plot. There would not be. She had known that since she was fourteen. She drew the rectangles and numbered them and moved the tape on up the hill, and her hand on the pen was perfectly steady, and she noted the steadiness the way you note a thing you have been told to watch.

The Tipton plot was near the top, under the cedar.

She had seen it from below all morning and worked toward it the way you work toward weather you can see coming up the valley, and when there was no longer any other plot between her and it she carried the board up the slope and set everything down again among her own dead. The grass was longer here. No one had scythed it. Her father did not come up, then — she understood it suddenly, and did not know what to make of a man who would drown rather than leave his dead and would not cut the grass over them.

Her grandfather's stone. Her grandmother's. A scatter of aunts, the names she had been made to recite as a child the way other children recited Scripture, *and these are your people, Cora, and you will lie among them.* And the newest stone, its letters cut shallow and a little crowded at the end by a hand that had run out of room, the creek rock still pale where the older stones had gone the color of the weather: *Verlie Tipton, 1879–1933. At Rest.* And beneath the dates, smaller, the one line her father had found to cut for her: *the water is wide.*

Cora stood over her mother's grave and the field book hung in her hand and for a moment she could not remember what the number was for.

She made herself do it. She set the tape and drew the rectangle and wrote *Verlie Tipton* in the column, and thought, with a cold-

ness that frightened her more than grief would have, *this one is to be moved*, and wrote the number that meant her mother's body would be lifted out of this hill in a box and carried up to Sawmill Ridge by men who had never heard her sing. *The water is wide*. Her mother had sung the old ballads in a voice that could stop a room, and quilted by the lamp until her eyes went, and been merciful in a hard country in a way Cora had not understood until she was grown and gone and had met people who were not. She gave her a number and moved the tape.

"And this one," Junior said.

He was above her, where the cedar leaned, his hand flat on a stone Cora had not yet come to — a low gray stone, older than her mother's by half a century to look at it, the marble gone soft and dark, lichen in the cut letters. He read it the way he had read all of them, plain, careful, doing his job.

"Asa Tipton," he read. "Eighteen and eighty. No other date. Just the one year." He looked at her. "Kin of yours, I reckon. Same name as the —" He stopped himself, because even Junior Sealy, twenty-two and hollow-kind, knew that you did not say the drowned Greer boy's first name out loud to a Tipton in a Tipton graveyard. "Same name," he finished. "It is a common enough name up here."

"It is," Cora said.

She came up the slope to the stone. She had to. It was the next grave, and she was the one with the pen, and there was no honest way to skip it. She knelt in the long grass beside it and the cold of the ground came up through her trousers and she put her own hand on the top of the stone where Junior's had been, because she did not know how to make herself read it otherwise, and the marble was cold and faintly damp and the lichen rough under her palm. *Asa Tipton. 1880.*

She had been here once before. Fourteen, and July, and the ground in front of this stone raw and dark, a long mound of red clay no rain had yet beaten down, her father at the head of it with his hat in his ruined hand saying the words, her brother beside him with his face like a shut door, and no one else come, because the valley had been told it was an old grave, an infant uncle forty

years gone — and had believed it, the way it believed Ila Greer was only mad. Cora had stood at the foot of it in her good dress with the river still cold on her and the cut on her eyebrow raw under its scab, and looked at the wrong name and understood that the wrong name was now the truest thing about her life, and that she would carry it.

She knelt by it now and reached for the field book to write the number, and her hand would not do it.

It was not a tremble. That was the part she could not explain, afterward — not the small betraying shake she had felt yesterday at the scope and blamed on the cold. It was a refusal. Her hand, the hand that had drawn the drowning of a county without faltering, that had held steady through her own mother's grave ten feet down the hill, simply would not bring the pen to the linen and write the number that came next. She watched it not do it. She told it to, in the flat measuring voice she used inside her own skull — *it is only the next grave, give it the number* — and the hand lay in the grass on the stone and would not. There was no crosshair this time, only her own steady hand gone strange to her on the cold marble, and the cut year, and under the cut year six feet of Burnt Ridge clay and what it held, which was not an infant, which had never been an infant, which was a thing she had helped put there with the river still on her and had spent fifteen years and the whole steady architecture of her life learning to draw rectangles around.

“Miss Tipton.”

She did not answer.

“Cora.” It was the first time the boy had used her name, and the wrongness of it — the gentleness of it — was what reached her. She looked up. Junior was crouched a little way off, his long young face open and scared, holding the dumb end of the tape out toward her as if it were a thing that might help. “You have gone white,” he said. “You want to set a while. It is a hard hill. I have seen grown men have to set down on this kind of work, it is no shame, my own —”

“Give it grave forty-one,” she said.

Her voice came out flat and even and from a long way off, the United States Government voice, and her hand, hearing it, did at

last what it was told, came up off the cold marble and brought the pen to the linen and drew the small open rectangle and wrote 41 inside it, neat as a town, and beside it she wrote *Asa Tipton 1880* in the small upright hand that had carried her out of these mountains, and the writing of it did not steady her this time. That was the new thing. For the first time in her professional life the writing of a thing down did not make it smaller. The rectangle sat on the linen with the others and was the same size as the others and was not the same at all, and she knew it, and the hill knew it, and somewhere a dog barked and another answered, doubling off the ridges.

“Forty-one,” Junior repeated, and wrote it on his pad, and did not ask why a forty-year-dead infant should turn a woman white when her own mother’s grave had not, and Cora was grateful to him for the rest of her life for it — that he carried other people’s silences without weighing them.

She was capping the ink, her hands steadier now, when the truck came up the road.

It was not a wagon this time. It came in a low first-gear grind and a banging of an unsprung bed over the ruts and stopped at the gate with a cough, and a man got down and stood looking up the hill with his hands on his hips, taking the measure of the place the way she had that morning, by the eye, by the count. He was not tall but built square and low to the ground, like something meant for digging, a town hat pushed back and town shoes gone to ruin in the country mud, and even from forty graves away she could see he was at ease here in a way none of them — not Renfro, not Junior, not herself — was at ease, that the graveyard was to him simply where the work was.

He came up through the stones without minding where he stepped, reading them as he came, and stopped a few feet off and touched his hat brim.

“You would be the mapper,” he said. “Tipton. They told me down at camp you grew up in this hollow. That ought to make it easier — you will know who is who up here. Half my trouble in these old churchyards is the unmarked ones, fieldstone, no name, nobody left living that recollects.” He put out a square hard hand.

“Hicks. Roy Hicks. I do removals.”

“I know what you do,” Cora said, which was what Renfro had said to her, and she heard the echo and did not care for it. She did not take the hand. “We are not finished platting. The crew cannot work the hill until the plat is done and the consents are in.”

“Sure, sure.” He took his hand back without offense, a man used to people not wanting to shake it. “I am not here to dig today. I am here to look and figure my schedule. Four cemeteries to clear before the gates close and not a one glad to see me.” He turned a slow circle, counting, his lips moving a little. “Sixty-odd. That cedar yonder is going to be a misery, roots in among the boxes.” He looked back at her, and there was nothing cruel in his face, only the flat practiced ease of a man who had made his peace with a thing other people could not look at. “The marked graves are the easy half. Stone says a name, family signs the paper, we lift the box, off it goes. It is the unmarked ones eat your time.”

“Why is that,” Junior said. He had come down near Cora, the tape coiled in his hand, watching Hicks the way you watch a snake not coiled to strike but a snake still.

“Because you have got to identify them by what is in the ground,” Hicks said, “instead of by what is on top of it.” He was looking at the hill now, at the whole sloped field of the Cane Hollow dead, and Cora had the cold sense that he saw it the way she did, as a field of distances to be resolved. “The stones lie. Not on purpose, mostly. But they lie. A stone says what the living wanted said. Wrong dates, hopeful dates, a name carved for somebody got buried elsewhere, two souls under one slab and the slab only naming the one they could afford to letter. I have learned not to trust the rock. The rock is a story.” He tapped his own chest, over the heart, with one square finger. “The bones do not have a story. The bones are just true. A young man’s skull is not an old man’s, and a babe in arms you could not mistake for aught else, no matter what is cut up top.” He shrugged, settling his ruined town hat. “Bones do not lie. Stones do. I go by the bones. It is the only way to be sure you are carrying the right soul up the mountain.”

The hill was quiet. Junior had gone still. Somewhere the dog

gave up barking.

Cora became aware that she was kneeling in the long grass with her hand once again flat on the cold gray stone, grave forty-one, *Asa Tipton, 1880*, though she could not have said when she had put it back, and that Roy Hicks, who went by the bones, was looking down at her hand on the stone with the mild incurious attention of a man who had seen many people touch many graves and long since stopped wondering why.

“That one is forty-one,” she said, and took her hand off it, and stood. “You will have the plat by week’s end.”

Chapter Four — 1919: The Ford

In the summer she turned twelve, the river was still only the river, and the best place in the created world was the broad flat ford below the Greer bottom where the Pigeonroost spread itself thin and warm over a bed of sun-yellowed stone, and Cora Tipton believed, as she would never afterward believe anything, that the people she loved would always be exactly where she had left them.

It was the first summer Dewey let her come along. He was sixteen and she was twelve and the four years between them had until that summer been a wall, and then all at once it was a door, and she never knew what changed except that Verlie said *take your sister* one Sunday after meeting and Dewey, instead of his usual outrage, only said *come on then* over his shoulder, already walking, and Cora had flown after him barefoot down the wagon track with her heart going like a bird in a hand, down through the high corn and the rabbit tobacco and the smell of the river coming up to meet her, and she had not let herself even breathe loud for fear he would change his mind.

Asa Greer was already at the ford when they came down through the willows. He was seventeen that summer, two years older than Dewey, the oldest of the bunch and the gold center of it, lying back on the big flat rock they called the table with his shirt off and his fiddle on his bare chest and one foot trailing in the water, and when he heard them coming he did not sit up, only lifted the fiddle and laid the bow across it without looking and drew one long low note that bent up at the end like a question, and Dewey laughed and answered it the way you answer a friend, and Cora stopped dead in the willows and felt something open in her chest that would not

close again for fifteen years.

She had seen him before. Everyone had seen Asa Greer. But she had never seen him like this, at his ease in his own country, the sun on him and the river under him and the fiddle answering whatever Dewey said as if the two of them had a third language between them made out of notes. He sat up at last and saw her hanging back in the willows and grinned, and the grin was the whole trouble, she would think later, the grin was where it all started, because it took her in. It did not look past her to Dewey the way grown boys' faces looked past a twelve-year-old girl. It found her, particular, in the willows, and lit.

"Who is this," he said. "Dewey, you never said you had a sister hid out."

"That is just Cora," Dewey said, already shucking his shirt, already wading.

"Just Cora," Asa said, in a voice that made the *just* into a small joke against Dewey, a joke on her side, and Cora came out of the willows because there was nothing else in the world to do.

They were at the ford every day that summer that the work would let them off, which in a farming country in July was fewer days than a child wanted and more than a child had any right to. They came down hot from the corn rows with the chaff still itching in their collars and went into the warm slow water and let it carry the day off them. The ford was wide and gentle there, the river spreading and slowing over the flat stone so that even in a wet year it ran no more than thigh-deep across the shallows, and below the shallows there was the green pool under the far bank where the water went over your head and you could open your eyes and see the trout hanging in the cold and the light coming down in moving rods. Asa could swim the pool underwater bank to bank without coming up. Dewey could not, quite, and would not stop trying, and Cora, who could not swim at all that first summer and learned that summer in the warm shallows with Dewey's hand under her belly, watched her brother surface gasping and triumphant and beaten and saw that her brother loved Asa Greer with the whole unguarded force a boy has before the world teaches him to guard it.

And so did she. She knew it for what it was even at twelve, or she knew the size of it if not yet its name. When Asa played the fiddle on the table rock in the long gold evenings she lay on her back on the warm stone with the others and watched the first stars come out over the ridge and felt the music go into her through the rock itself, the low strings buzzing up through her shoulder blades, and she thought, with the absolute conviction of a child, *this. I want this. I want this to be the whole of it.* He played the reels fast and showy when he wanted to make Dewey laugh, but it was the slow ones she lay awake remembering, the old sad tunes Verlie sang at her quilting, the same ones, *the water is wide*, and once when Cora said so — said *my mama sings that one* — Asa stopped and looked at her over the fiddle, surprised, and said, “Does she. Verlie Tipton. I would walk a ways to hear that,” and played it through soft and true with his eyes shut, for her, she let herself believe, for her.

It was the summer Verlie was most alive in Cora’s memory of her, because it was the summer Cora was old enough to see her as a person and young enough still to be unafraid of her. Verlie came to the ford only once, late in August, walking down through the corn in the cool of the evening with a basket because she had a notion to wash the quilt tops in the running water and dry them on the willows, and she sat on the bank with her skirts gathered and her bare feet in the shallows and watched the children and asked Asa to play, and he played, and then Verlie sang. She did not sing for show. She sang the way she sang at her quilting, half to herself, a long old ballad about a girl who waits at a river for a lover who has drowned and does not know it yet, and her voice was low and unhurried and it stopped the children where they stood in the water, and Asa let his fiddle fall silent under it and only watched her, and when she was done nobody said anything, and the river went on, and a kingfisher rattled down the far bank, and Cora, standing thigh-deep in the warm water in the last of the light with her mother singing and her brother golden and the boy she loved looking at her mother with something like reverence on his bright reckless face, was as happy as she would ever be in her life, and did not know it, which is the only way anyone is ever that

happy.

Her father came down to the ford too, that summer, though never to swim. Absalom Tipton at forty-four was a lean hard man with a gentleness in him that the country had not yet ground out, and his faith in those years was a gentle thing, a thing of mercy and not yet of judgment. He came down on a Sunday evening to fetch them up to supper and he stood on the bank in his clean shirt with his hands easy at his sides — his hands whole, that was the thing Cora's memory snagged on for the rest of her life, his two hands whole and strong and easy, the right one able to close around a plow handle or a child's shoulder or a hymnbook with no thought given to the closing — and he watched Asa play a minute, and he said, "That is a gift, son. The Lord does not give that to many. You mind you use it right." And Asa, who used nothing right, who was even then beginning the thing that would kill him, grinned up at Absalom Tipton from the table rock and said, "Yes sir, I aim to," and Absalom believed him, because Absalom in 1919 still believed boys when they grinned and said they aimed to, and the believing was a kind of beauty in him, the last of it, and Cora would spend fifteen years trying to remember whether she had seen it that evening for the beautiful doomed thing it was or whether she only painted it so afterward, the way you paint a thing once you know how the light is going to fail.

It was that summer the still began, though Cora did not understand what she was seeing.

She knew only that Asa and Dewey would sometimes, of an evening, leave the ford and go up the little branch that came in below the Greer bottom, the two of them with a tow sack and a low murmuring laughter between them, and be gone an hour, and come back with the laughter higher and looser, and that she was not to come and not to tell. She thought it a game of older boys. She thought everything that summer was a game. She did not know the word *blockade* yet, or *revenue*, or what a coil of copper was for, or why the branch up under the laurel had begun to carry on the evening air, faint under the river smell, a sweetish cooked-corn reek that was not the reek of any food.

Once she followed them partway, quiet as she could go in the

laurel, and saw through the leaves a thing she did not understand: a squat shape of brick and clay set into the bank with a fire going low and blue under it, and a copper worm running down into a barrel, and the two of them crouched at it tending it like a sick calf. Asa straightened first and saw her in the leaves — saw everything, always — and instead of anger his bright face went sly and merry, and he came and crouched in front of her and put one finger to his lips and the other hand into his pocket and gave her a peppermint, warm from his body, and said, low, so Dewey could not hear, “This here is our church, just Cora. You do not tell on a man’s church.” And she had taken the peppermint and not told, because secrets were the currency of being let to come along, and because Asa Greer had made her keeper of his church, and she would have eaten coals before she gave him up. She did not understand for years that she had already begun, at twelve, to do the one thing she would do for the rest of her life: hold a Greer’s secret and call the holding of it love.

And it was that summer she came by the locket.

It was no great thing. A pedlar came through the hollow in August, the way they did, with his tin trunk of pins and thread and almanacs and a tray of small brass jewelry green at the edges, and Verlie, who never spent a cent on herself, stood a long while over the tray and at last counted out the coins for a little brass locket no bigger than a thumbnail, heart-shaped, hollow, with a hinge you could pry open with a fingernail and nothing inside it but room. “For when you have somebody to put in it,” Verlie said, and laughed, and pinned it to Cora’s dress, and that night Cora sat by the lamp while her mother quilted and bent her head over a ballad of her own under her breath, and Cora took her father’s awl, when no one was looking, and scratched her own two initials inside the empty heart, awkward and deep, the brass curling up bright under the point — *C T*, a long downstroke and a clumsy crossbar — because she had nobody yet to put in it and would not give the room away to nothing, and because a thing with your name in it was a thing that was yours. She did the letters deep on purpose. She wanted them to last. They would last longer than she could have dreamed, and be read by the worst possible eyes, fifteen years

on and six feet down.

She wore it all that summer at the ford. She wore it the long gold day her mother came down and sang. Asa noticed it once — noticed everything, that was his gift and his ruin — and reached out and turned it over in the sun where it hung at her throat and said, “What is in it,” and she said, fierce, twelve years old, “My own self,” and he laughed and let it fall back against her wet collarbone and said, “Good. You hang onto your own self, just Cora,” and went back to his fiddle, and she pressed the warm brass to her breastbone where his fingers had been and thought she would never give it to anyone as long as she lived.

She would give it to him in two years’ summers, days before he died, and it would go into the ground with him under the wrong name, and a man named Roy Hicks who went by the bones would lift it out of the dark in 1936 and read her own deep awkward initials in it, *C T*, scratched by a twelve-year-old who believed her people would always be exactly where she left them. But that was the far end of the summer, the end you could not see from the table rock, and the children did not look toward it, and the river ran warm and shallow over the yellow stone with no notion at all of how high it could rise, and Verlie sang the long sad tune about the girl who waits at the water, and Asa played it under her, and Absalom watched from the bank with his two whole hands easy at his sides, and the worst place in the created world was, for a little while longer, the best.

Chapter Five — The House on the Ridge

She put it off three days, and then she could not put it off any longer, because the plat was at camp and the consents were the next thing and a draftsman who would not knock on the one door she had been sent up the mountain to open was a draftsman with nothing left to hide behind.

She walked up. She could have driven the truck most of the way, but she walked, leaving it at the foot of the laurel and going up the old footpath she had not set foot on in fifteen years, and her body knew it though her mind had filed it flat — the root that crossed the path like a step at the third turning, the place where you had to duck the rhododendron, the long last pull where the path ran out of the laurel and the house stood up gray against the ridge with its stone chimney and its straight thread of smoke. She stopped where the laurel ended and stood a while looking at it. A draftsman taking the measure of a parcel. She made herself think it in those words. *The last name above the line that has not signed.* And then she went on, because the words did not work anymore, they had stopped working at grave forty-one, and there was nothing left to do but climb the steps.

The door was open behind the screen. She could see the front room dim through the wire, the same room, the table her grandfather had made, her mother's quilt frame swung up against the ceiling on its pulleys with a quilt half-finished still in it, three years finished with the dying. She raised her hand to knock and a voice came from inside before her knuckles found the wood.

"I have been watching you stand in the laurel for a quarter hour," her father said. "You may as well come in as freeze."

She came in. He was sitting by the cold hearth in the cane chair with a Bible open on his knee, and he did not get up, and for a moment in the dimness he was only an old man, smaller than the father she had carried out of the hollow in her memory, his hair gone white and his shoulders come forward over the book — and then he lifted his face to her and it was Absalom Tipton entire, the long bones of it, the gray eyes that were her own gray eyes, the stillness in him that had always been the most frightening thing about him because you could never tell what it was holding back.

“Daddy,” she said.

He looked at her a long time. He looked at the field trousers and the felt hat in her two hands and the ink on her fingers and the white scar at her eyebrow that they both knew the truth of and neither had ever named, and she made herself stand and be looked at, the way she had stood for Vester Renfro on the road, and it was worse than Renfro by the whole distance of her life.

“They told me,” he said at last, “that the dam had got hold of one of mine to do its measuring. I did not credit it. I said, no child of Verlie’s would put the government’s stick on her own people’s ground.” His voice was low and even and it had the cadence of the Book in it, it had always had the cadence of the Book in it even when he was only asking for the salt. “And then I watched you come up the valley three days ago with your little machine on your shoulder, and I have watched the smoke off Dewey’s chimney and yours all week down at the camp, and I see I was wrong. You credit a great deal, when you are old, that you would not have credited young.” He closed the Bible over his thumb. “Sit down, Cora. You are letting the cold in standing there.”

She sat. The chair across the hearth had been her mother’s. She had not meant to sit in her mother’s chair and she was in it before she understood, and she saw her father see it, and something moved far back in the gray eyes and was put away.

“I have come about the buyout,” she said, because she had decided on the path up that she would say it first, plainly, before the house could soften her into the kind of daughter who could not say it at all. “Not as your daughter. Because it is my parcel to close and I would rather it was me than a stranger in this chair telling

you what I have got to tell you.” She heard the camp-office voice come up out of her, the United States Government voice, and she clung to it. “The gates close the first of December. Everything below the red line goes under. This house is below the line. The fields. Burnt Ridge. You are the last holdout in Cane Hollow, and if you do not sign, the government takes it anyway, by condemnation, in a court, for less than they offer you now, and they move you with marshals if they have to. I have drawn the maps that let them do it. I am telling you true and not soft.”

Absalom listened to all of it without moving. When she was done he sat a moment, and then he set the Bible on the stand beside him, careful, and he lifted his right hand off the cover where it had been resting, and he looked at it.

She had been waiting for the hand without knowing she was waiting for it. It lay open on his knee, or as open as it went — the fingers curled in toward the palm, the knuckles thickened and the whole hand bent permanently to a kind of slack half-fist, the way a hand sets when the bones in it have been broken and have knit how they pleased. An old injury, the valley said. From the farming, the valley said. He turned it over slowly in the gray light from the door, the way you turn over a tool you have used so long you have stopped seeing it, and Cora could not take her eyes off it, and she knew he knew she could not, and she understood that he had lifted it on purpose, that the hand was the first thing he had said to her that was true.

“I broke this hand a long time ago,” Absalom said. “You would remember when.” He laid it back down on the Bible. “It has never closed right since. I cannot make a fist of it. I cannot hold a hammer above an hour. Your brother does the heavy of it now, what little I let get done.” He looked up at her. “A man learns to do with a hand that will not close. He learns there is more in the world he cannot grip than he ever thought, when he was young and had his two hands and believed he would always have the holding of things.” The gray eyes did not leave her. “You have come up here to make me let go of the one thing I have got left the grip of. And you have come with your machine and your line and your court and your marshals, and you have told it to me true and not

soft, like you said, and I will give you that, you have not lied to me. So I will not lie to you.” He stood up out of the cane chair, slow, an old man’s rising, and he was tall again standing, taller than the house had let him look sitting, and he went to the screen door and stood looking out at the ridge falling away below into the doomed valley. “Come here. There is a thing I will show you, and then you will go back down and tell your Mr. Frame what I told you, and we will not have to do this again.”

She rose and went and stood beside him at the door. Through the wire the land fell away — the dooryard, the laurel, the long slope, and below it the valley floor with the river spread wide and pewter across it and the corn shocks small and the red-banded stakes catching the light, marching, and farther up the south shoulder of Burnt Ridge under its cedar the gray scatter of the graves, too far to read but she could have set her finger on grave forty-one with her eyes shut.

“There,” Absalom said, and lifted the broken hand and pointed it, not at the house, not at the fields, but up the ridge, at the graveyard. “Your mother is there. I put her there myself, three years back, in the ground her people lie in, where I told her all our married life she would lie, where I aim to lie beside her when my own time comes, which by the look of things will not be long, and a mercy.” His voice did not break. It went lower and more even, which was worse. “And I will tell you what the government can do, Cora, since you have come to tell me what it can do. It can take my house. Let it. It is boards. It can take my fields. Let it, I am old, I have wore them out and they have wore me out and we are square. It can take the church and the store and the school and the whole of this hollow and put eighty foot of water over it, and I will stand on this porch and watch it come and I will not say a word against it, because a man cannot fight water and a fool is the one that tries.”

He turned and looked at her, and the stillness in him broke, just once, just at the edges, and what came through it was not anger.

“But it cannot make me leave my dead,” he said. “That is the one thing. They can dig her up out of that hill with their numbered boxes and their hired man that goes by the bones, and they can haul

her up to their Sawmill Ridge and set her in a row with strangers above a line some boy painted, and that will not be moving Verlie. That will be moving dirt. Verlie is in that ground because I put her there and said the words over her and meant them, and the words do not come up with the box. You can map it, daughter. You have mapped it. I have watched you map it three days. But you cannot make me sign a paper that says it is right to lift my wife out of her grave for the sake of a lake, and you cannot make me leave this ridge while she is in it, water or no water, and that is the whole of what I have got to say, and you may write it in your little book."

Cora stood at the screen with the whole drowning valley spread below her and could not write anything in any book.

A wagon was coming up the lower road. She saw it before her father did, or before he let on, the slow nodding pull of a mule on the grade, and a man on the seat she knew by the set of his shoulders before she could have named him, and a moment later her father said, without turning, "That will be your brother. He comes Wednesdays to see I have not died in the night." There was something in it that was almost humor and was not humor at all. "You and Dewey both, now. Verlie's two children, come to dig up Verlie." He sat back down in the cane chair and took up the Bible. "Go and let him in. He will want to say his piece."

She went out onto the porch and down the steps as the wagon came into the dooryard, and Dewey looked up at her from the seat and his tired face went through a whole weather of things — surprise and something like fear and something like an old grievance and, last and worst, a kind of resignation, as if he had known all along that she would be standing on this porch and had only been waiting these fifteen years for the day to come. He was thirty-three and he looked older. He had Verlie's coloring gone gray at the temples and Absalom's long bones and a stoop in him that their father had not had at his age, the stoop of a man who had carried a family on a piece of bottom ground that was about to go underwater, and his hands on the lines were a working man's hands, both of them whole, and Cora found herself looking at his hands the way she had looked at her father's, and made herself stop.

"Cora," he said. He wrapped the lines and got down. He did

not come to her. He stood by the wagon wheel with his cap in his hand and looked at her across the dooryard. "I heard it was you. Down at the camp. I would not believe it." He gave a short sound that was not a laugh. "Same as him. We are a family that does not believe a thing till it is standing in the yard." He looked up at the dim shape of the old man in the cane chair through the screen. "Has he signed?"

"No."

"He will not." Dewey said it flat, an old defeat. "I have been three months at him. Ruth has cooked him every Sunday dinner since August trying to soften him and he eats it and thanks her and will not sign. The young ones go up and he is gentle as anything with them, Lonnie and Pearl, he lets the baby pull his beard, and then he sends them down the hill and sits up here above" — he stopped, and his eyes went up the ridge to the cedar, the exact line her father's broken hand had drawn, and Cora saw that they all of them, every Tipton left alive, oriented to that one grave the way a compass needle orients, could not help it — "above Mama," Dewey finished, low. "And he will not come off it. He has got it in his head that signing the paper is the same as putting her under the water with his own hand. That if he just stands here and never signs, somehow she stays put and dry and his."

"She does not stay dry, Dewey." It came out of her harder than she meant. "The water does not care what he signs. The TVA moves the unconsented graves anyway, to the common ground at Sawmill Ridge — no family there, no name on the consent, just a number off a plat." *A plat I am drawing*, she did not say. "If he will not sign, the only thing he changes is that he does not get to choose where Mama goes or stand by when they move her. He does not stop it. He only makes it crueller."

"I know it." Dewey turned his cap in his hands. He was quiet a moment, and when he spoke again his voice had dropped, gone careful, the way the whole hollow's voice went careful around a certain summer. "You drew the cemetery. You been up on the ridge."

"Yes."

"All of it." It was not quite a question. He was not looking at

her now. He was looking at the cap in his hands. "The whole hill. Every grave."

The dooryard was very still. Up in the laurel a jay went off like a rusty hinge, the same sound, the same exact sound it had made on the road by the ford three days ago, and Cora understood that the question under Dewey's question was the question that had been in the house from the moment she stepped through the screen, the question that had been in Vester Renfro's careful face and in Roy Hicks's mild incurious eyes and in her own hand refusing the pen on the cold gray stone, the held breath that no one in this family had let out in fifteen years and that was not going to be let out now, in a dooryard, with the old man listening through the screen.

"Every grave," she said. "Numbered and platted. That is the job."

Dewey looked at her then, full, and for one moment the careful thing dropped out of his face and she saw all the way down into him, into the thing he carried, and she knew that he saw the same all the way down into her, the two of them standing in the dooryard with the same drowned summer behind their eyes — and then he put his cap on, and the door of his face shut, and he said, "I will go talk to him. For all the good it does," and he went past her up the steps and into the house, and through the screen she heard him say, "Daddy," in the tired patient voice of a son who has said everything already, and her father say, "Sit down, Dewey, you are letting the cold in," and she stood alone in the dooryard above the valley her own hand was helping to drown, and below her the river went on quietly being a lake, and up the ridge under the cedar grave forty-one held its breath with the rest of them and did not let it out.

Chapter Six — Consent

Wendell Frame liked the camp best at first light, before the men were up and the compressors started, when the whole creation of it stood quiet under the mountains and you could see plainly what it was for.

He came out of the section office onto the duckboard walk with his coffee and stood a while and looked at it. Coldwater had not existed two years ago. There had been a sycamore bottom here and a wagon road and not one thing more, and now there were eleven hundred men and their families in the rows of board houses up the slope, and a commissary, and a school the government had built, and a clinic with a doctor in it who had already, by the camp nurse's count, broken three cases of typhoid before they could spread — three families that in the old order of things would have buried somebody and called it the will of God. There was electric light strung pole to pole down the whole length of the camp, and Wendell never tired of it. He had grown up by a coal-oil lamp in a farmhouse in Loudon County and had done his sums by it and ruined his eyes by it, and he could remember the precise winter evening, a boy of nine, when he had understood that the dark his family lived in was not a thing God had ordained but a thing that could be ended, if only enough men decided to end it. That was the whole of his faith, near about. The dark could be ended. The flood could be stopped. The fever could be broken. A man did not have to take what the river and the mountain handed him.

Down below, past the last houses, the dam itself stood in its forms — the great gray wall of it rising out of the gorge, the cofferdams holding the Pigeonroost off to one side so the men could pour, the cableways slung across the whole works carrying their buckets of concrete out over the drop. By December the gates would close and

the water would begin to climb and within two winters there would be a lake forty miles long where there had been a poor crooked valley, and off the powerhouse at the toe of the dam would come current enough to light every hollow in three counties — light, and a pump that would bring water up out of a well so no child need haul a typhoid bucket from a fouled spring, and a milking machine, and a wireless, and a hundred small mercies that the people of these mountains had been told for a hundred years they were too backward and too poor and too far up the creek to ever deserve. Wendell believed they deserved them. He believed it the way some men believed in the blood of the Lamb. He had seen the studies out of Knoxville, the maps of the river's old rampages, the drowned bottoms and the swept-off bridges and the long ledger of the dead going back to the eighteen-sixties, and he believed past any arguing that what they were building here was the single greatest act of mercy the federal government had ever performed upon its own forgotten people.

He also knew what it cost. He was not a fool and he was not a cruel man, and he had made it his particular study not to become either one, though the work pulled hard in both directions.

It cost them their dead, for one thing. It cost them their churches and their schoolhouses and the corner where their granddaddy was born, and these were not nothing; Wendell had learned in three years of this work that they were, to the people who held them, very nearly everything. He had sat at a hundred kitchen tables and watched men who could not read sign their names to a paper that turned their whole world into a pool elevation, and he had learned to sit still under their grief and not to hurry it and not to flinch from it, because flinching was a kind of lie. He told them the truth. He told them the water was coming whether they signed or not — that the Congress had decided and the courts had upheld it and the only thing left to decide was whether a man took the appraised value and the removal allowance and walked off his land with money in his pocket, or whether he made them take it from him in a condemnation court for less, and walked off with nothing but the satisfaction of having lost slowly. Put that way, almost all of them signed. Wendell did not think it was a trick to put it that

way. He thought it was the kindest thing he had to offer, which was the truth told plainly, the way you would set a broken arm — quick, and with a steady face, because dragging it out only fed the pain.

That was the thing the men from Knoxville never understood, the ones who sent the memoranda. They thought a holdout was a man who needed convincing. Wendell knew a holdout was a man who was grieving, and that you did not convince grief. You waited it out, or you walked it gently to the edge of what it could no longer refuse, and you let it cross over on its own feet so it could keep the one thing it had left, which was the feeling of having chosen.

He had gotten good at it. That was the part he did not examine too closely, the part that came to him sometimes at first light over his coffee like a fly against a window. He had gotten very good at hearing a man say *no* and understanding it not as an answer but as a problem — a stuck valve, a fouled line, a thing with a cause that could be found and a remedy that could be applied. *No* because of the wife's grave. *No* because of the price. *No* because a man had been humiliated in front of his sons and could not afford to back down. *No* because of pure mountain contrariness, which was the easiest of all to solve because it wanted, more than anything, to be taken seriously. He had a remedy for each. He kept them the way a doctor keeps his bottles, and he reached for them without quite looking, and the parcels closed, one after another, up the valley, and the line on the master plat in the Knoxville office filled in green for *acquired* the way a wound fills in with healthy flesh, and Wendell took an honest satisfaction in it that he had stopped being ashamed of around the second year.

The memorandum on his desk that morning was about the Tipton parcel.

He had read it twice already. It came from the district office and it was, in the flat way of such things, a threat dressed up as a schedule. The Cane Hollow tract had to be cleared by the fifteenth of November to keep the disinterment crews and the salvage crews and the burning crews on their sequence; the gates closed the first of December and would not wait; and one parcel above the line — *Tipton, A., 61.4 acres, Burnt Ridge* — remained unacquired, with

the cemetery sitting on it that had to be platted and moved before the church grounds below could be touched. The district wanted it closed. The district wanted to know, in the particular phrasing that meant somebody higher up had asked, *what is the holdup on the Tipton parcel*. And there was a line at the bottom, almost an afterthought, that Wendell had read three times. *If voluntary acquisition is not completed by 1 Nov., recommend the parcel be referred for condemnation proceedings to ensure timely access for removal operations*.

Condemnation. The court. Which Wendell could do — had done, twice, when an old man's stubbornness threatened to throw the whole works off its sequence — and which he hated, because it took the choosing away. A condemnation order did not wait out grief. It sent a marshal, and it set a date, and on that date the bones came up whether the family stood at the graveside weeping or not. It was the failure of his whole method, the admission that he had not been able to walk a man to the edge gently enough, and it left a bad taste that lasted weeks.

He did not want to condemn Absalom Tipton. He had never met the man, but he had read the file, and a file like that told you things. Sixty-one. Widower. One son already signed and gone over to the Sawmill Ridge tract, which meant the family fight was already lost and the old man knew it. The wife buried up on that ridge in 1933, which meant the *no* had a grave under it, and a grave under the *no* was the hardest kind, the kind you could not buy or argue or shame your way past, because the man was not trying to keep his land. He was trying to keep his dead.

Wendell finished his coffee. The compressors had started down at the dam, the day taking hold. He went back inside and found Cora Tipton already at the drafting table by the north window, where the light was, bent over her board with her sleeves pushed up and her hat off, working ink onto a sheet of linen with that stillness she had that he had noticed the first week and gone on noticing.

He had not, at the start, wanted a woman in the section. He would not have said so aloud and he was a little ashamed of it now, but it was the truth, and he held himself to truths. Then

he had watched her work. She drew the way some men shot — without seeming to aim, the line just going where it was meant to go and stopping where it was meant to stop — and her field notes balanced to the third decimal and her parcels closed without a gap, and inside a month he had stopped thinking of her as the woman in the section and started thinking of her as the best draftsman he had ever been sent. There was something else in it too, which he also held himself to: that he liked her. He liked the company of her quiet. He liked that she did not chatter and did not flatter him and did not, like the young engineers, perform her competence for him; she simply had it, and let it speak, and when she did speak it was worth the wait. He was a married man, decently and unremarkably, with a wife and two girls down in Knoxville he saw on the weekends, and he did not let the liking go anywhere it should not, and he was honest enough with himself to know it was there and to keep an eye on it the way he kept an eye on the river.

He stood a moment behind her and looked at what she was drawing, and his stomach dropped a little, because it was the cemetery.

She had the churchyard laid out clean — the long axis of Cane Hollow Free Will Baptist, the rows, the plots fenced off by family — and she was working the contour through it, the fine dashed line of one thousand sixty-eight feet curving across the hill, and below the line she had begun to number the graves in her small square hand for the removal crew. He could see the Tipton plot up in the corner of the sheet where the ridge steepened, a little cluster of penciled rectangles waiting on their numbers, and one of them larger than the rest with a name already lettered beside it that he could not read from where he stood.

“That is good work,” he said, because it was, and because he had learned that with her you said the true thing first.

She did not startle. He had also noticed that about her, that she did not startle, that you could come up behind her and she would have already accounted for you. “It is most of the way there,” she said, not looking up. “The plat. I can have it inked by tomorrow and the field crew can begin numbering on the ground.”

“That is what I came to talk to you about.” He pulled a stool over and sat, which was a thing he did on purpose, to be at her level

and not standing over her like a man with a memorandum, though he had a memorandum. "The cemetery moves first. You know that. Hicks's crew can't work the church bottom till the ridge is cleared, and the church bottom's the deepest part of the pool." He turned his cup in his hands. "And to move a grave I have to have a consent. Signed, by the next of kin, on every plot in that churchyard. Free disinterment, the government pays the freight, new ground up on Sawmill Ridge, perpetual care — it is a good thing we are offering, Cora, I believe that, it is more than most of these people could ever do for their own dead. But I have to have the paper. And the paper has to be got by somebody going house to house, and sitting at the table, and explaining it, and not leaving till the name is on the line."

She had stopped drawing. He saw the pen lift off the linen and hang.

"You want me to take the consents," she said.

"I want you to take the consents." He said it gently, because he could feel it land wrong somehow, feel a stillness come off her that was different from her working stillness. "You are from here. I know that cuts both ways — I am not a fool, I know there is some that will slam the door on a Tipton same as on me. But there is more that will sit and listen to one of their own than will sit and listen to a man from Knoxville with a clean collar. You speak the way they speak. You know the names. Pruitt has the forms and the plat numbers and he will keep you square on the paperwork. I just need somebody to do the part Pruitt can't, which is to be a human being at that table." He paused. "It is the hardest job I have got. I would not give it to you if I did not think you were the best one to do it."

He watched her look at her own drawing. He could not read her face — he never entirely could — but he saw her eyes go to the upper corner of the sheet, to the little cluster of Tipton rectangles, and rest there.

"My father's parcel," she said.

"Is its own trouble and I am not asking you to fix it." He said it firm, because that at least he could be clear about. "He is your daddy and that is a thing I will not put on you. I will go up there

myself, or I will send Pruitt, or it will go where it has to go.” He did not say *condemnation*. The memorandum was face-down on his desk and he meant to keep it there as long as he could. “The cemetery is different. The cemetery is the whole churchyard, every family in this hollow but yours, and it has to be done by the fifteenth or the court does it for us, and I would a great deal rather you did it kind than have a marshal do it cold.” He stood up off the stool. “Will you take it?”

He saw her hand go, without her seeming to will it, to her own face — to the faint white scar at the corner of her left eyebrow, the one he had wondered about and never asked about, a small old mark she touched the way some people touch a wedding ring. She pressed it once with two ink-stained fingers and took the hand away.

“I will take it,” she said.

“Start with the easy ones,” he said, relieved, already turning toward his desk and the rest of the morning’s trouble. “Renfro will tell you who is glad to go. Leave the hard ones for when you have your hand in. The Greer plot’s down in there too somewhere — old woman, Renfro says she’s not right — you may want to leave her till last.” He stopped in his own doorway and looked back, and meant it kindly, and would remember, much later, that he had said it. “You will do this better than anybody I could send, Cora. You will do it gentle. That is the whole reason I am giving it to you.”

He went to his desk and turned the memorandum back over and bent to the day’s work, the green filling in up the valley, the dark waiting to be ended, and he did not see — he had no way to see, and would not have believed it if she had told him — that he had just handed the one person on earth who must not open Asa Greer’s grave the pen that would route the crew straight to it.

Chapter Seven — Ila Greer

She had meant to leave the Greer plot for last, the way Frame told her, and she had managed nine days of doing it.

Nine days going house to house through the lower hollow with Pruitt's satchel of forms over her shoulder and the plat folded in her field book, sitting at the tables, saying the words she had learned to say — *free of cost to the family*, and *perpetual care*, and *new ground up on Sawmill Ridge, good high ground, it will never go under* — and getting the names, one after another, on the lines. It had gone the way Frame promised. Some of them wept and signed. Some of them had wept themselves dry already and signed like men paying a debt. A widow named Combs had taken Cora's hand in both of hers at the door and thanked her, *thanked* her, for being one of their own come to do it, and Cora had walked back to the truck and sat in it a while before she could drive.

The Greer place she left for last because Renfro had told her to and Frame had told her to and her own body told her to, the same animal in her that had wanted to go back into the store. But on the ninth day she had the rest of the churchyard signed but for that one plot, and she could not put a half-finished plat in front of Frame, and so on a gray Thursday afternoon with the first spits of sleet in the wind she drove down the slough road to the falling house where the last of the Greers still lived below the red, and she did the thing she had crossed half a continent to keep from doing, which was to go and stand in front of Asa's mother and ask her to dig him up.

The house had been a fair house once. She could see the bones of it under the ruin — a four-room frame house with a porch, the kind

a man built when he meant to do well — but the man was long dead and the doing-well with him, and now one porch post had rotted out so the roof sagged like a broken wing, and the chinking had fallen from between the boards, and there was a window mended with a fertilizer sack gone gray and sodden in the weather. A red-banded stake stood in the dooryard not eight feet from the steps. Cora had set the plat to know already what the stake said: the house sat eleven feet under the line. Whoever lived here would be water by spring whether they signed a thing or not.

A goat watched her from under the porch. She knocked, and waited, and was about to be glad no one was home when the door came open and Ila Greer stood in it.

Cora had braced for the madwoman of Renfro's telling, the broken-down woman the valley humored on Thursdays. What stood in the door was only old before her time — a tall woman gone to bone, gray hair scraped back hard from a face that had been handsome and was now all plane and hollow, in a man's sweater buttoned to the throat. Her eyes were pale and perfectly clear. That was the thing Cora had not been ready for, the clearness of them, like creek water over stone, like there was nothing the matter with the woman at all until you had stood in front of her a moment and felt how those clear eyes went *through* you to something behind your head, some fixed far point only she could see.

"I know you," Ila Greer said.

The wind worked at the fertilizer sack in the window. The sleet ticked on the dead leaves.

"I am Cora Tipton, Mrs. Greer." She made herself say it whole. "Verlie's girl. I have come up from the camp on the —"

"I know whose girl you are." There was no heat in it. The clear eyes moved over Cora's face the way Vester Renfro's had, doing the arithmetic of fifteen years, but where Renfro's had filled with grief Ila Greer's filled with something stranger, a kind of slow recognition, as if Cora were a person she had been expecting for a long while and had begun to think would not come. "Verlie Tipton's girl. You have got her chin." Her gaze dropped, once, to the field book under Cora's arm, the satchel of forms, and came back up. "You have

come about the digging.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“They have sent everybody else.” Ila stepped back from the door, not quite an invitation but the room behind her opening anyway, dim and cold, a dead stove and a table and a smell of damp and woodsmoke and old grease. “The little clerk with the spectacles. A preacher that was not even our preacher. A man come last week wanted to give me forty dollars to let them carry off my Mama and Daddy and never said a word about —” She stopped. The clear eyes held Cora’s. “And now they have sent me a Tipton. Come in out of it. I will not stand here heating the whole hollow for the government’s benefit.”

Cora came in. There was a chair and she did not sit in it. She set the satchel on the table and got out the plat the way she had nine times before, the practiced motion, the folded linen opening into its grid of contour and grave, and she found her own voice going into its furrow. “Mrs. Greer, what the government is offering — and I know how it must sound — is to move the family graves to new ground, up on Sawmill Ridge, above the water, free of any cost to —”

“By the water,” Ila said.

Cora stopped. “Ma’am?”

Ila Greer had not looked at the plat at all. She had gone to the window with the fertilizer sack and stood with her back to the room, looking out through the gap at the gray and at the slough beyond it where the willows stood in water that had not been water last year, the backwater come up over the bottoms, the dam’s slow reaching. When she spoke again it was not to Cora. It was the voice the valley had taught Cora to expect, but it did not sound mad. It sounded like the truest thing the woman knew, said the way Cora’s father said Scripture.

“My boy is not in that ground up on the ridge. I have told them and told them. They put a stone up there with his name on it and they have all let themselves believe it, the whole hollow, because it was easier to believe than to keep looking. But I never believed it. A mother knows where her child is.” She turned from the window, and the clear eyes fixed on Cora, and went through her to the far

point, and Cora felt the floor of the room tilt very slightly under her. "He is down by the water. He has been by the water all this while, waiting. Where you left him."

The sleet ticked on the leaves. Somewhere under the porch the goat shifted and was still.

Where you left him. Cora stood with her hand flat on the cold linen of the plat and could not, for the length of three breaths, make a sound come. The scar at her eyebrow had begun, faintly, to burn — an old trick of it in the cold, she had always told people, the white seam of a childhood fall — and she wanted to put her fingers to it and did not dare move her hand from the table. *Where you left him.* The woman's eyes had not changed. There was no accusation in the clear water of them, no knowledge, nothing aimed; the *you* was the *you* of a madwoman's refrain, the *you* that meant the government, the camp, the whole world of strangers who would not believe her. It meant nothing. It could not mean anything. Ila Greer had been saying her boy was by the water for fifteen years to anybody who would stand for it, Renfro had said so, the whole valley had said so; she would have said *where you left him* to the clerk with the spectacles and to the man with the forty dollars and to a fence post.

And yet.

Cora had spent fifteen years building a self that could read a thing true while it came apart, and she stood now in a falling house below the red line and found that the self had gone somewhere and left her a fourteen-year-old girl on a wet bank with a creek stone in her hand and the high water taking what it took. *Where you left him.* She had left him there. Whatever her stone had or had not begun, whatever Dewey's fists and her father's broken hand had finished, she had been there on the bank and she had not gone in after him and she had let them carry it as a drowning and she had left him — left the hollow, left the water, left the lie standing on the ridge under the wrong name — and gone north and become a person who measured distances so she would never again have to feel one. The woman could not know. The woman knew everything.

"Mrs. Greer," Cora said, and heard her voice come out wrong, not the camp voice, something younger, "I am only here about the

—”

“Sit down,” Ila said, “before you fall down. You have gone the color of ash.” And she said it not unkindly, the way Renfro had been not unkind, the valley’s terrible gentleness, and Cora sat down in the cold chair because her legs had stopped being reliable.

Ila Greer watched her a moment. Then she went, slow, to a chest against the wall — a blanket chest, the only good piece of furniture in the room — and knelt at it stiffly and raised the lid, and the smell of cedar came out into the damp. She lifted something wrapped in a quilt scrap and brought it to the table and set it down and folded the cloth back, and it was a fiddle. Old, the varnish gone to amber and crazed like a dry creek bed, one string curled loose off the peg. Cora knew it. She had not seen it in fifteen years and her whole body knew it, the way it had known the wagon for a wagon, the way it had known the willows for the Sealy place. Asa Greer had stood on a flat rock at the ford with that fiddle under his chin and played until the bats came out, and a girl of thirteen had sat in the laurel and believed that the sound of it was love.

“He left it the night he went,” Ila said. She did not touch it now. She looked at it. “Folks said he run off. Said a boy that would leave a debt and a quarrel behind him would leave a fiddle too, would leave anything, light as he was.” The clear eyes came up. “But a fiddle player does not leave his fiddle. You did not know my boy, you were a chap, but I will tell you. He would have left me. He would have left this hollow and never looked back, he had it in him, I always knew it. But he would not have left that. Not living.” She laid her hand over it then, the whole loose-strung neck of it under her palm. “So I have kept it by me. For when he comes up out of the water and wants it.”

She reached again into the folds of the quilt scrap and drew out a paper, soft and furred at the creases from being opened and folded a thousand times, and held it a moment, and did not give it to Cora, only let her see that it was a child’s letter — a few lines in a big careful pencil hand, the hand of someone just learning, the words gone gray. “And this. He wrote me this when he was eight years old and I was down at Knoxville the winter I was sick, and it is the only thing in his hand I have got, and I have read it so

many times I have wore the words half off.” She folded it back into the cedar smell. “That is what they are asking me to consent to. They think it is dirt and a box of bones. They do not know I have got him right here in a chest. They do not know he is by the water waiting, and that the day they close that dam they will drown my boy a second time, and nobody in this whole hollow will so much as say his name out loud, because they would rather he had run off than face what the water did.”

She closed the chest.

“I will not sign your paper,” Ila Greer said, gentle as anything, her clear eyes going through Cora to the far point one last time. “Tell the government Ila Greer will not consent. Tell them she is broke in the head and says her boy is by the water. They will believe you. They have believed it for fifteen years.”

Cora gathered the plat with hands that would not quite obey her and folded it wrong, the creases fighting her, and put it away, and stood. At the door she turned, though she had told herself not to. The woman was at the window again, her back to the room, looking out at the willows standing in the new water.

“Mrs. Greer,” Cora said. “I am sorry. About your son.”

For a moment Ila did not answer. Then, without turning: “You are the first one come up here in fifteen years that said his name like it weighed something.” The clear voice did not break. “Go on now. It is fixing to sleet in earnest. Mind the slough road, it floods at the low place, the water is not where it used to be.”

Cora drove back up out of the lower hollow in the failing gray with the sleet coming harder against the windshield, and at the low place the slough road did flood, the backwater lying flat and pewter-colored across the ruts where no water had ever lain in her girlhood, and she had to stop the truck and look at it a while before she dared put the wheels through, the still water reaching up out of the dark to take a road that did not yet know it was a riverbed. *Where you left him.* She put the truck through the water in low gear and felt it drag at the wheels and let her, and on the far side she did not stop again until the camp lights came up, ordinary and electric and meaning nothing, in the dark ahead.

Chapter Eight — The Field Book

She did not sleep, and a little before dawn she gave it up and lit the lamp in the section office, where she had a cot in the back and the run of the place at night because Frame trusted her with the key, and she got out the cemetery plat and spread it on the drafting table and looked at it the way you look at a wound you have been keeping covered.

It was nearly done. Nine days of work, the whole churchyard rendered true to the half-foot — the church, the contour, the families fenced in their plots, and the graves below the red line numbered in her square hand for Roy Hicks's crew. Numbered. That was the thing she had not let herself think about while she did it, the way she had not let herself think about a great many things by keeping her hand busy and her eye on the next observation. She had numbered the graves. And the number was not a description. The number was an instruction. Roy Hicks did not read the hollow; Roy Hicks read this sheet of linen. He would take it up Burnt Ridge with his crew and his probing rods and he would work it the way Cora worked a parcel — number to number, in sequence, the paper telling the spade where to go — and when his sequence reached the upper corner where the ridge steepened, it would reach the Tipton plot, and the Tipton plot held five rectangles, and one of them was larger than the rest, and beside it in her own pencil she had lettered, nine days ago, before she understood what she was drawing, the name off the stone: *Asa Tipton, 1880*.

She sat down on the high stool and looked at it for a long time.

She knew the whole shape of it now, sitting there in the lamp light with the cold coming up through the floor. She had known it

since the store, since *begin Greer & Tipton plots* dried side by side in her field book; she had known it on Burnt Ridge the first day when her hands went wrong on the transit over that stone for the first time in her working life; she had known it, if she was honest, since Cincinnati, since the day she let Frame believe she could be useful on the Tipton parcel and let herself believe it too. The grave was below the red. It would be opened. And when Roy Hicks opened the box under the stone cut *Asa Tipton, 1880* — an infant uncle who had died at a year old in 1880 and lain fifty-six years without a marker until a July night in 1921 gave the government a use for his name — Roy Hicks would not find an infant. He would find a man grown. He would find a skull broken at the temple and the jaw, and bones too long and too many years too young for the date on the stone, and Roy Hicks had told her himself, the day he came up the ridge to schedule the digging, easy as a man talking about the weather, that there was not a thing on this earth easier to read than the difference between an old man's grave and a young one's.

And then it would not be the river's secret any more, nor the family's, nor hers. It would be the county's. It would be the Greers'.

The plat was a sheet of linen and a set of marks on it that she alone controlled.

She understood that with the cold clean force of a thing she had been refusing to understand, and she made herself sit with it, because she was a person who looked at things. She controlled the plat. She controlled the numbering, which was the route. She controlled the schedule too, near enough — she carried the field crew's order of work to Pruitt, who carried it to Hicks, and a thing put last got done last, and the gates closed the first of December and there was only so much daylight in a November and only so many men. She could put the Tipton plot last. She could put it so far last it ran out of November and went under the water unopened, a box below the line that the slackwater took before any spade reached it, and water, Dewey would say to her later in a different room, water keeps secrets. She could do more than delay it. She could draw it wrong. She could letter that one rectangle not as a marked Tipton grave at all but as *unmarked* — *relocate to common ground*, and an unmarked grave below the line went to

Sawmill Ridge in a numbered box without a family standing over it and without an identification and without anyone, ever, lifting the lid to read what the stone had lied about for fifteen years. A whole life and death routed off the page with three penciled words and a changed number, the way she had routed the Sealy cabin and the Combs graves and the dying store, the way she routed everything: into the cold mercy of the grid, where a thing became a distance and an elevation and could not hurt you any more.

It would be a federal record. She would be falsifying a federal record, in India ink, in her own unmistakable hand.

She tried, the way she always tried, to think it through as a problem in the work — coldly, as a thing of lines and consequences, because that was the country where her hands could live. If she lost the plot to common ground, the box would go up to Sawmill Ridge unopened and unread, and that was clean, but Pruitt kept his own copy of the grave count off her field numbers, and Reverend Buckles kept the burial register, the old man half-blind but with a memory that had never once failed the hollow, and the register would say there was a Tipton plot of so many marked graves on Burnt Ridge, and her plat would say one fewer, and a clerk in Knoxville who balanced columns for a living would find the gap the way she found a gap in a closed parcel — by feel, by the wrongness of a number that would not come round. If instead she only delayed it, pushed it last and prayed November ran out before the spades reached it, then she was wagering a man's bones against the daylight and the weather and Roy Hicks's appetite for work, and Roy Hicks worked like a man paid by the grave, which he was. There was no clean way. Every route she traced ran into paper she did not control or memory she could not edit or a contractor who read the ridge by sight and not by her lovely true lines at all. The realization ought to have steadied her — it was a problem and the problem had no good solution and a person could set down an impossible problem. It did not steady her. Because she understood, tracing the dead ends one after another, that she was not looking for a way to keep the truth buried. She was looking for a way to do it that she could live with. And that was a different search entirely, and it had no end.

She got up off the stool and walked the length of the dark office and back. She had never in her life put a false mark on a drawing. It was the one thing she had, the one place she had built where the ground did not give way — that what she drew was *true*, that the numbers did not lie even when everything and everyone around them did, that a girl who had stood on a bank and let a lie stand had grown into a woman whose every line could be trusted to the third decimal. She had made her whole self out of that. And she stood now in the lamp light and felt how thin it had always been, how the precision had never once been honesty; it had been the opposite of honesty; it had been the most beautiful place in the world to hide. She had drawn ten thousand things true so that she would never have to say the one thing that was true. And here, finally, was the page where being true and being honest came apart and stood on opposite banks, and she would have to wade out into one of them, and she did not know which was the water.

She heard a truck on the camp road, and another, the day starting, and she put the lamp out before she had decided anything, because the deciding frightened her more than the dark.

It was past first light and she was at the table again pretending to work the contour when Junior Sealy came in stamping the cold off his boots, early as always, his cap pushed back, a biscuit in his hand he had got from the cookhouse. He stopped when he saw her, the way he always did, half a beat of straightening up he could not seem to break himself of, and then he came over to warm his hands at the stove and stood looking at the plat on her table with his mouth full.

"That the churchyard," he said. Not a question. He had been up there with the rod for nine days; he knew it line by line. He swallowed and was quiet a moment, looking at it, and Cora watched his eyes travel up the contour to the corner where the ridge steepened and the little cluster of plots sat above the dashed red line — and not above it, she saw him see, *below* it, the dashes cutting across the top of the Tipton plot the way they cut across everything.

"Miss Tipton," he said, slow. "Can I ask you a thing and you not take it ill."

"You can ask."

He set the rest of the biscuit down on the stove ledge like he had lost the want of it. He had gone red, the way he did, but he made himself say it. "I painted the red on the Combs door yesterday. Frame wants the band on every doorpost below the line now, not just the stakes, so the salvage men know what comes out and what gets burnt. And old man Combs, he stood there and watched me do it. Watched me paint that stripe on his own door he hung hisself. And he never said a word, just watched, and when I was done he said, *much obliged, son*, like I had done him a kindness." Junior looked up, and his young face was working the way Renfro's had worked, the same thing in it, the valley's bottomless trouble. "I have painted the red on near every house I grew up under. I painted it on our own. And I keep telling myself it is just paint, it is just a mark, the water is coming whether I paint it or not, somebody has got to do it and better me than a stranger." He stopped. "But it is not just a mark. Is it. A mark is the thing that makes it real. Long as there is no mark a man can tell hisself it might not happen. The minute I paint that stripe I have told him it is going to. I have wrote it on his door where he has got to look at it." He shook his head. "I do not know how you stand to do this work, Miss Tipton, and you from here. I mean that respectful. I cannot hardly stand to do my piece of it, and all I do is hold the rod and paint the red. You are the one that decides where the red goes."

Cora stood very still with her pen in her hand over the plat.

You are the one that decides where the red goes.

The boy had said it the same way he had said the other thing nine days ago at the commissary, *hands that knew the names* — said in one plain breath, with no idea what he was handing her, the whole of her trouble. He thought he was confessing his own small unbearable part. He did not know he had just laid her bare to herself in the lamp-warmed dark: that she was not the rod-man, not the one who only painted the mark; she was the one who drew the map the mark obeyed. She decided where the red went. She decided which graves got numbered and which got lost, which names stood and which dissolved into *common ground*, which truths came up with the bones and which the slackwater took down

forever and held. The whole apparatus of erasure, the benevolent terrible machine Frame served with his clean faith, came down in the end to a woman with a pen and a sheet of linen and a choice she had spent fifteen years pretending she did not have.

"You stand it the same way you do, Junior," she said, and her voice came out low and even, the camp voice, the only armor she had. "You tell yourself somebody has got to, and better it be hands that know the names. And you go on hoping that is true."

He chewed on that, looking at the plat, and then he said the other thing, the thing she would carry out of the room and a long way past it. "I will tell you what I have studied on. A man could paint the red wrong." He said it quiet, not looking at her, like a confession or a temptation he had turned over alone on the ridge. "A foot high, say. Half a foot. Nobody would catch it, not by eye, and it would put a house above the line that the line meant to take, and that house would stand. I have thought about it standing there with the can in my hand, Miss Tipton. Combs's house. I have thought, I could save it with a brushful. Move the mark and the water lets it be." He picked the biscuit up and set it down again. "But the water would not let it be. That is the thing. I could paint the line wherever I pleased and the water comes to one thousand sixty-eight whether the paint says so or not. All I would do is lie to a man about his own house, so he did not pack in time, so the flood took him by surprise instead of fair. The mark does not move the water. It only tells the truth about it sooner or later, and sooner is the kinder one." He shook his head, ashamed of the size of what he had said. "So I paint it true. It is the meanest thing I can do for a man, and it is the only kind thing too. That is what I cannot get the bottom of."

Cora stood looking at the boy with something cold and clear opening in her chest, because he had handed her, blind and plain, the one argument she had been searching the whole dark night to refuse. The mark did not move the water. She could draw the plat however she pleased, lose the grave to common ground, push it last, lie in the loveliest ink in three counties — and the slackwater would still come to one thousand sixty-eight, and the truth was already in the ground the way the water was already in the river, climbing,

patient, indifferent to what a frightened person wrote on a sheet of linen. A false line did not save a thing. It only decided who got told, and when, and whether the telling came fair or by ambush. She could not bury Asa Greer a third time. She could only choose, like Junior with his brush, whether the people who loved him learned it sooner and kind or later and cruel.

“You will not get the bottom of it,” she said. “There is not one. Go on to the truck, Junior. I will be right behind you.”

He looked at her a moment, not satisfied, too young yet to know there were questions you did not get answered, and a little startled to have been answered at all. Then he got his rod from the corner, and said he would warm the engine, and went out into the cold.

Cora stayed at the table. The lamp was out and the gray window light lay flat and honest across the plat, across the church and the contour and the numbered dead, across the upper corner where five rectangles waited in the steepening of the ridge and one of them, larger than the rest, carried in her own pencil the name of a man who had died at nineteen and lain fifteen years under the wrong age and the wrong name and the wrong stone, a lie she had helped a child of fourteen to start and could now, with three words and a changed number, finish for good in the clean cold ink of the United States Government.

She uncapped the pen. She set the nib to the linen at the corner of that rectangle. She held it there, not moving, the ink gathering at the point and trembling once and not yet falling, while down the valley the compressors took up their work and the river went on quietly, patiently, being a lake.

Chapter Nine — Below the Red

The level was the gentlest instrument she owned, and Cora had come to think of it as the honest one. A transit could be made to lie a little, if you were careless or wished to be. But the level only told you one thing, up or down, and it told you the truth of it to the hundredth of a foot, and it did not care what the truth cost. You set it on its tripod and read the rod against the crosshair and wrote the number down, and the number was the number. There was no arguing a benchmark.

She had carried it up Burnt Ridge that morning to settle a thing she had spent three nights pretending was unsettled.

Junior went ahead with the rod over his shoulder, picking the old path between the leaning stones, and she came behind with the level and the field book and the tripod, and the frost was still in the north shadow of the church though it was near ten o'clock. The maples had turned and half let go. Their leaves lay over the graves in a wet red drift, and where Junior's boots scuffed them they showed the names beneath — Renfro, Sealy, Buckles, the worn sandstone ones with no names left at all, only the shape of a stone meaning *here* — and the church stood at the head of it with its door open on a dark Cora did not look into.

She had a benchmark to work from. The TVA had run levels up the valley the spring before and left their marks — a brass disk in the great gray rock at the foot of the cemetery, below the Sealy plot — and from that one true post she could feel her way grave to grave like a person walking a fence in the dark.

She set the level over the disk and leveled it and shot Junior's rod, and the figure gave her the height of her instrument above

the sea. After that it was only patience. Junior moved the rod from grave to grave at her hand-signals, and she read each one and subtracted and wrote it down, and the cemetery became, line by line, a list of elevations. The dead, reduced to their heights above a water they had never seen.

The red line was 1,068 feet. She knew it the way she knew her own age. Everything she read above that figure would stay dry, would keep its grass and its stone and its peace, would lie under sky a hundred years more. Everything below it would be opened.

The Sealy graves came in at 1,071 and a few inches — above the red, safe — and she saw Junior's shoulders ease when she called it out, though he said nothing, only moved the rod on. The Renfros, lower on the slope, read 1,066. Below. The old preacher Buckles's people, an aunt and two infants, 1,065. Below. She wrote them in her small upright hand and felt nothing she would have named, because the feeling she was working toward was higher up the hill, in the corner where the laurel came in, where her own people lay, and she made herself read every grave between here and there so that she would arrive at it as a surveyor and not as a daughter.

Verlie first. Her mother's grave was newer than the rest, the mound not yet fallen flat, the stone a piece of soft creek rock her father had dressed and cut himself, the letters shallow and a little uneven where his broken hand had wandered — *Verlie Tipton, 1879-1933, At Rest*, and smaller underneath, so small you had to stoop, *the water is wide*. A line from one of the old ballads she used to sing. Cora read the rod against the stone's base and the figure came up 1,067 and a half. Below the red. Half a foot below. Her mother would be lifted out of this ground and carried up the mountain in a numbered box.

She had known that already. It was the reason her father would not sign. But knowing a thing in a camp office and reading it off a rod with your own eye were two different knowings, and the second got into her in a way the first had not, and she stood a moment with the field book open and made the figure neat, 1,067.5, neater than it needed to be, drew the little decimal point round and certain, because that was how you stood it: you turned the unbearable into a clean number and the clean number held.

“Miss Tipton.” Junior had the rod planted in the corner by the laurel, at a stone she had been not-looking at for an hour. “This the last of them up here? This little gray one and them two old ones?”

It was the last of them. The Tipton plot proper sat in the highest corner of the cemetery, three graves and the room for more: Absalom’s father and mother under matched fieldstones gone black with lichen, and beside them, smaller, lower, a single stone of soft creek sandstone that some hand had dressed flat and cut by lamp-light, not by a stonecutter’s chisel but by a farmer’s, the letters shallow and a little drunken, leaning the way the bootleg cutting of a name leans when the man cutting it has never cut one before and means never to do it again.

ASA TIPTON, it said. 1880.

No second date. An infant’s stone, or so it read — a baby brother of her father’s, dead the year he was born, gone into the ground before he had a season to him. That was the story of it. That was what the stone said and what the valley believed and what Cora had drawn on her plat three days ago with her own hand, lettering the name into the little inked rectangle, *Asa Tipton b. 1880*, the way you would letter any old family grave.

She had not let herself read its height. She had platted the whole cemetery, numbered every grave, assigned each one its place in Roy Hicks’s order of work, and she had skipped this one square, left it for last, told herself it was only because it sat in the awkward corner where the level would be hard to set. That had been a lie even as she thought it. She had skipped it the way your tongue skips the broken tooth.

Now Junior stood at it with the rod, waiting.

“Hold it plumb,” she said.

He held it plumb. She bent to the level and brought the stone’s base up into the field of the glass, the dead leaves, the wet sandstone, the bottom edge of the lettering, the crosshair lying across the figures on the rod, and she read it, and read it again to be sure, and there was no being unsure about a level.

A thousand sixty-seven feet, and two inches.

She straightened. She did the subtraction without the book,

because some sums you do in your blood. Ten inches below the line. Not feet. Inches. The grave marked *Asa Tipton, 1880* sat ten inches inside the part of the world the slackwater was coming to take, which was to say it would be opened — had to be opened, by federal law and by the plain arithmetic of the level she trusted more than she trusted herself — and lifted, and looked at, and carried up the mountain before the first of December.

Ten inches. If her father's grandfather had set the cemetery a single fence-rail higher up the ridge. If the engineers had drawn the line at 1,067, as she had heard they once considered. Ten inches stood between the lie staying buried and the lie coming up into the daylight in a contractor's hands.

She wrote the figure down. Her hand did not shake. She had practiced, all her life, the not-shaking. *1,067.2*. And below it, because the field book demanded a note and because some cold clerk in her would not be stopped, *below taking line 0.8 ft — disinter*.

"That puts it under, don't it," Junior said. He had read it in her face, or in the silence. "By a hair."

"By a hair," Cora said.

"Shame. It being so old." He shifted the rod off his shoulder and leaned it against the laurel and blew on his hands. "Ten inches and it could of stayed. Don't seem right, does it, that the water don't know the difference between a grave from before your granddaddy's time and one from last spring. Treats them all the same."

"The water doesn't know anything," Cora said. "That's the only good thing about it."

She had not heard the old man come. Afterward she would think that this was the thing about Reverend Tom Buckles, that he moved through the world as a man moves through a house he has lived in seventy years, finding the doors by memory; but in the moment he simply was there, at the church door where she had not let herself look, a tall stooped figure in a black coat green at the seams with age, one hand on the doorframe to know where he was. His eyes were the milky blue of a clouding sky. They did not point quite at her. But his face had turned to the exact spot where she stood, the way a plant turns, by some sense that was not seeing.

"That is Verlie Tipton's girl," he said. Not to her. To the ridge,

the way the old ones spoke, putting a thing out into the air to see did the air agree. "Cora. I christened you. You would not recall it. Nineteen and seven, a wet spring, your mother sang afterward in the churchyard and the whole congregation stood out in the mud to hear her. *Wayfaring Stranger*. She had a voice would stop the creek to listen." He came forward off the door, slow, his free hand reaching ahead of him through the air, and Junior moved without being asked and put a hand under the old man's elbow and steered him among the stones, and Buckles let him, knowing the boy's hand for a kindness and not an insult. "You are surveying my churchyard."

"I'm platting it, Reverend. For the removal." She heard the camp voice come up in her, the United States Government voice, and was ashamed of it in front of him and could not stop it. "Every grave below ten sixty-eight has to be recorded and moved before the water. I'm drawing the map the crew will work from."

"A map." He stopped a few feet off, breathing the climb. Up close his face was a riverbed of lines, and there was nothing failing in it but the eyes; the rest was all there, all sharp, a mind kept whole inside a body letting go. "I have buried this hollow forty-one years, child. I do not need a map. I could walk you to every soul on this ridge in the pitch dark and lay my hand on the right stone. I have done it — when the diphtheria came I dug some of these myself, here —" he lifted his hands, and they were a digger's hands, broad and broken-nailed, an old man's hands that had done a young man's work too long — "and I know whose they are by the feel of the ground over them. A map." He said it again, gently, the way Vester Renfro had said *the little spyglass*. "Well. The government must have its paper. We keep our dead in our hands and they keep theirs on a sheet."

"I have to keep it true," Cora said, and did not know why she said it, except that it was the only defense she had ever had and she offered it up to him the way she had offered it to the road, to Renfro, to herself, every day of her life. "Whatever else. It has to be true."

"Does it." The old man's clouded eyes came round, and though they could not have found her, she felt found. "Then you will want

to know about that stone the boy has got his rod against.”

The ridge went very still around her. A maple leaf let go somewhere and she heard it the whole way down.

“Asa Tipton,” Buckles said. “Eighteen and eighty.” He nodded slowly, his face turned to the corner, to the laurel, to the soft sandstone with its leaning drunken letters. “I keep the register, you understand. The burial book. Have kept it since old Brother Coffey laid it in my hands the year I was ordained, and there is not a soul gone into this ridge in forty-one years that is not written in it, with the date, and the cause where it was known, and the place. The exact place. I am particular about the place.” He paused. “It is the one thing I could always be sure of, when the eyes started to go. A man can lose his sight and keep his memory, if the Lord is kind, and the Lord has been kind to me in that one particular and unkind in most others, and I have made my peace with the bargain.”

“Reverend —”

“There is no Asa Tipton in that ground.” He said it plainly, almost mildly, the way he might have corrected the date of a hymn. “Oh, there was a baby. Absalom’s brother. Born in the spring of eighteen and eighty and dead before the dogwoods, and we buried him, Brother Coffey buried him, up in that corner, and it is in the book — *infant son of* — and then the parents’ names, so faded now I take them more on memory than on sight — *no name given, July*. No name, child. They had not the heart to name him. You do not name them sometimes, when they go that quick. You spare yourself the name.” He turned his face to her, and the milk-blue eyes were terrible in their not-seeing, in how plainly they saw. “So the book says no name. And the stone says Asa. And a stone and a book do not, as a rule, disagree. When they disagree, it is because somebody made one of them lie.”

Cora’s hand was at her side, the field book open in it, the wet leaves at her feet, the level standing on its tripod reading the truth to the empty air. She made herself breathe. She made the camp voice come. It came thin.

“Stones get re-cut,” she said. “A family will set a name on an old grave, years after. To honor —”

"They will," Buckles agreed. "I have seen it done." He let the silence sit, and she understood he was a man accustomed to letting silence do his work, who had spent forty-one years saying the hard thing and then waiting in the stillness while it landed. "But when they do it, they come to me. They say, Brother Buckles, we are setting our grandmother a stone at last, will you say a word over it. And I write it in the book — *stone set, such a year*. There is no such note by that grave. That stone went up in the night, some year I can put close to, and no one ever asked me to bless it, and no one ever told me a name to write, and I never wrote one, because there was none give me. And a man does not blunder up a churchyard in the dark to set a stone over a baby that has lain quiet fifty years." He turned, at last, his whole stooped body turning, back toward the church door, his hand going out for the air ahead of him. "I have wondered, all this while, who I was being kind to, saying nothing. I expect I will find out now. The water has a way of asking the questions a man would not."

He found Junior's elbow without looking, and Junior took him, white-faced, having heard all of it, and steered him down through the leaning stones toward the open door.

"It is below the line, then?" the old man said over his shoulder, halfway there. "That stone. Below your ten sixty-eight?"

"By ten inches," Cora said.

"Ten inches." Reverend Buckles stopped in the church door, a black shape against the dark inside, and she could not see his face anymore, only hear him, the old voice coming out of the building he had kept and was losing. "Then the Lord and the government have agreed on a thing for once, and they have agreed that grave is to be opened. I would make my peace with it, were I you. A thing buried in ground that is going under water — that is a thing the Lord means to raise."

He went in. Junior came back out alone and stood looking at her, the rod forgotten against the laurel, his young face working at a sum too big for it.

Cora did not move for a long moment. The level stood on its tripod, faithful, reading the gap of air between the crosshair and the dead, and she went to it because it was the only thing on the

ridge that wanted nothing of her, and she bent to the glass and looked through it at nothing, at the wet red world hung upside down and small and far away, reduced and orderly and held still. The crosshair lay perfectly flat across the grave that was not her uncle's. The water was coming for it from below and the old man's book was coming for it from the side, and there was, she understood with a calm that was worse than any panic, no number she could write that would lift it those ten inches into the dry.

"Miss Tipton," Junior said. "What did he —"

"Pack the rod," Cora said. "We're done up here for today."

Her hand, when she lifted it off the level, was steady. She had practiced all her life. But she stood a beat too long with it raised in the cold, looking at her own ink-stained fingers as though they belonged to someone else, before she made them close.

Chapter Ten — 1920:

The Still

She was thirteen the summer she learned what a man's voice could do when he wanted something, and the man was Asa Greer, and the something was never, that whole gold summer, her, though she spent it certain it was.

The still was up Laurel Branch in a slot of rhododendron so thick the noon sun came through it green as creek water, and you could stand ten feet off and not see it, the copper kettle and the worm and the little fieldstone furnace Dewey had laid, only smell it, the sweet-sour reek of the mash working, and hear the slow patient drip into the crock. Dewey ran it. That was the thing nobody said in front of their father and everybody knew. Dewey ran it and Asa sold it, down at the camps and over the line into North Carolina, and what they made they split, and what Asa got he lost, and what Dewey got he buried in a fruit jar against a year that was always coming.

Cora carried them water and carried them dinner and was let to sit on the flat rock and watch because she was Dewey's sister and because Asa liked an audience and because, that summer, no one had yet decided she was old enough to be sent away from anything.

"Now your government man," Asa was saying. He had the fiddle across his knee, not playing it, only holding it the way some men hold a cat, idle, possessive. He was eighteen and the best-looking thing Cora had ever seen or would, black hair and a mouth made for getting away with things, and when he talked he looked at you like you were the only one who would understand, and you believed it, every time, you believed you were the one. "Your government man, your revenue agent. You know what they pay him?"

“They pay him to leave us be, is what I hear,” Dewey said. He was feeding the fire, crouched, his face red with it. “Long as we’re little.”

“They pay him a salary, sure.” Asa turned a peg, a hair, listening to nothing. “But you know what else they pay? They pay the man that tells. There’s a reward, Dewey. Government puts up money — real money, folding money — for any man’ll walk into the revenue office and say, there’s a still up such-and-such a branch, here’s the man runs it. I heard it at the camp. Heard a fellow say he got fifty dollars for turning in a still over to Madison County. Fifty dollars.” He let the number lie there in the green light. “More than this whole operation clears in a season, you turn it in instead of running it.”

Dewey laughed, but Cora, watching, saw it was not all the way a laugh. “Then it’s a good thing nobody knows where ourn’s at but us three.”

“Good thing,” Asa agreed, and smiled, and bent his black head over the fiddle and played four bars of something so sweet and quick it raised the hair on Cora’s arms, and stopped, and looked up at her where she sat on her rock, and winked, and Cora’s whole thirteen-year-old chest went to water, and she did not understand — she was years from understanding — that she had just watched him set a fishhook in her brother and then turn around and bait another one in her, in the same green minute, with the same easy hands.

She thought he had winked because he loved her. She wrote it in the little tablet she kept under the eaves that night by a stub of candle. *A.G. winked at me today by the branch. I think.*

There was a cruelty in him that summer she saw once and unsaw a hundred times. It came out sideways, the way the worst things in people do, never where you were looking. A barn cat had kittens in the loft of the Greer place and Asa drowned the runt of them in the rain barrel one wet morning while Cora watched, and it was not the drowning that frightened her — she was a farm girl, she had seen culls done all her life, quick and turned-away and over — it was that Asa did it slow, and watched it, holding the little wet thing under by the scruff with two fingers and his face gone still

and curious and almost tender, the way a man's face goes when he is listening to a tune he half remembers, and when it was done he wiped his fingers on his trousers and looked up and saw her in the barn door and smiled his whole sweet smile at her as though they had shared something. "Couldn't of fed it through the winter anyhow," he said, gentle, reasonable, and it was true, and that was the worst of it, that it was true, and she carried the picture of his still curious face all that day like a stone in her shoe and by nightfall she had talked herself out of it. He was right. It couldn't have fed. She was being a child about it. She put it under, the way he had put the kitten under, and held it there until it stopped moving in her, and she was proud of herself for being woman enough to.

She would think of the kitten, years and years on, only once, and at the worst possible time, and wish she had let herself keep frightened of it when being frightened might still have done some good.

It had been a different summer the year before. She knew that even then, at thirteen, the way a child knows weather coming before she can say what's changed. The year before, Asa had been only joy — the river, the diving rock, the songs, the way he made even her father laugh once at the supper table before her father remembered who Asa was and shut the laugh off like a lamp. There had been no edge to him. Or there had been and she had not been able to see it. But that year of 1920 something had begun to come up in Asa Greer the way the wet comes up through a plaster wall, a stain spreading from underneath, and she felt it that summer though she could not have named it, and she loved him through it and past it and would not see it, because not-seeing was the great labor of being thirteen and in love, and she was good at labor, she came from people who were.

The debts were the underneath of it. She gathered that much from the men's talk, sitting still as furniture on her rock so they would forget she was there. Asa owed money down at the camps, card money, and owed a man named Sluder over the line, and the still was not paying it down fast enough, and Asa had stopped talking about the money he'd have and started talking about the money he was owed, which Cora would understand much later was

the turn a certain kind of man makes, from a boy who is going to be rich to a man who has been cheated, and that there is no coming back from that turn.

"You shorted me," he said to Dewey, late one afternoon. The light had gone amber. The mash smelled like rotten fruit and bread. Cora had her dinner basket packed to go and stood half in the laurel, and they did not see her. "Last run. The Carolina run. You said an even split and you shorted me a dollar and a half."

"I never." Dewey straightened up from the worm. He was the bigger of the two but he stood careful, Cora saw, the way you stand careful with a dog you have known a long time and just heard growl. "Asa. I weighed it out fair, same as always."

"Same as always." Asa wasn't smiling now. The fiddle was down at his side, hanging from his hand by the neck, and he had it the way a man holds a thing he might set down or might not. "That's just it, ain't it. Same as always. You and your daddy and your whole praying family, fair as always, and I'm the one carries it over the line where the law is, I'm the one Sluder's looking for, and you sit up here by your little fire and weigh me out my dollar and a half short and call it even." He took a step. It was nothing, a half step, but Cora felt the laurel go cold around her. "I could fix the both of us, you know. I could walk down to that camp tomorrow and fix everything I owe in one afternoon. There's a man down there with a federal badge that would count out folding money into my hand just to hear me say the words *Laurel Branch*."

It was the first time. She would remember it as the first time, the first time the thing under Asa came up through the surface and stood out in the open air between him and her brother, plain as the copper kettle. *I could walk down and tell*. He said it light. He smiled it, after, put the smile back on like a man putting a hat back on, and called it a joke, and played a tune, and Dewey laughed it off because what else was there to do, the two of them roped together by the still and the money and the years. But it had been said. The threat had a body now. It had been let out into the world and could not be put back, and Cora, thirteen, in the laurel with her dinner basket, felt the gold summer curdle in that instant the way milk curdles, all at once, irreversible, the sweet of it turning before

her eyes into the first of the sour.

She did not understand it as a threat. She understood it as a storm between two men she loved, and she did what she would spend the rest of that year and the next doing: she made it small in her mind, she filed it flat. Asa was only teasing. Asa would never. Asa loved Dewey like a brother, everyone said so, and Asa — here her thirteen-year-old heart took the great leap it had been built that summer to take — Asa loved her.

But the revenue man was real, and that fall he came. Not up Laurel Branch — he never found Laurel Branch — but into the hollow, a city-dressed man in a hard collar who put his Ford at Renfro's and went house to house asking mild questions in a flat valley nobody could place, and the men went quiet at the store, and the talk in the lofts and at the fires that week was all of him, and Cora heard the number again, the reward, said low and said sour, fifty dollars, a hundred for a big one, government money for a man who would point. The agent stayed three days and bought a man named Cody Hartsell out of a little still up Devil's Fork — Hartsell's own cousin pointed it, everyone said, for the money, and the cousin had to leave the county after, and his porch stood empty all that winter as a thing to look at on your way to church. The lesson was not lost on anyone. A still was not killed by the law. A still was killed by a man you knew, for folding money, in an afternoon. And Asa Greer had stood up Laurel Branch in the green light and said, smiling, that he was such a man, that he could be, that all it would take was the words and the walk down the hill — and the agent's Ford at Renfro's had made the saying of it real in a way the laurel had not, had put a face and a hard collar and a county courthouse behind Asa's joke, so that when Cora lay awake that fall she could see the whole of it laid out, the still and the words and the money and the empty porch, even as she told herself, fiercely, into the dark, that Asa would never do to Dewey what Hartsell's cousin had done, never, because Asa loved them. She believed it. She made herself believe it. It was the second great labor of that year, after loving him, and she did not yet know they were the same labor, and that she would lose them both.

That evening he walked her partway down the branch, which

he had never done, the two of them ahead of Dewey on the dark path, and he was sweet again, all sweet, the storm gone off his face entirely as though it had been weather and not a thing that lived in him. He asked her did she keep that little tablet still, the one he'd seen her writing in, and what did she write in it, and she would not tell him, going hot all over, and he laughed and said he bet he knew, and she said he did not, and he said, soft, near her ear in the dark where Dewey couldn't hear, "I bet there's a letter or two in there starts with A," and Cora thought she would die of it, die right there on the path in the smell of the laurel, and she said nothing, and he laughed again, pleased with himself, pleased with what he could do, and dropped back to walk with Dewey as if she were a thing he had set down.

She lay awake that night with the storm and the sweet both in her, unable to tell them apart, which was the trick of him, that you could never tell the two apart, and she chose, the way she would keep choosing, to believe the sweet was the true thing and the storm was the weather. She was thirteen. She did not yet know that with some men it is the other way around, that the sweet is the weather, blowing through, and the storm is the country underneath, always there, only waiting on the wind to drop so it can show itself entire.

That would come. The water had not yet risen on any of it. But the still ran all that summer up Laurel Branch in its slot of green light, and the money did not pay the debts down, and the threat sat between the two men where Asa had set it, small and patient, like a stake driven to mark a line that nobody had yet measured the height of, and Cora carried them their water, and loved a boy who was teaching her, drip by patient drip, the difference between being wanted and being used, a lesson she would not finish learning until the water closed over the place where he taught it.

Chapter Eleven — Quota

Wendell Frame had a way of asking for a thing that was worse than ordering it, and Cora, who had spent a week learning to read him the way she read ground, understood by the time she sat down across his desk that he had already decided and was only going to make her watch him be sorry about it.

The removal office was the warmest room in the Coldwater camp, a board shanty with a coal stove and a long table covered in her own kind of paper — plats, tract maps, the great roll of the reservoir survey with the taking line inked around the whole drowned country in a red that matched the stakes. There was a calendar nailed by the window. Someone, not Wendell, had drawn a heavy ring around the first of December in grease pencil, and below it written GATES, and the days between now and the ring had a way of standing out at her whenever she came in, the way a wound stands out, the count of them dropping.

“Knoxville’s been on the wire,” Wendell said. He was a trim man, careful in his dress even out here in the mud, and he had a true believer’s clear eyes and a tired man’s hands, and Cora had come, against her will, almost to like him. “They want the upper hollow closed. All of it. They’ve got a number, Cora, the way they always have a number, and the number says every parcel above the dam signed by the fifteenth of November so the title work clears before the gates. Every parcel.” He turned a pencil end over end. “I have got one that isn’t going to sign by the fifteenth, or the fifteenth of next year, or the fifteenth of never. And it’s the one with my surveyor’s name on the mailbox.”

“He’s my father, Wendell. Not my parcel.”

“I know whose he is.” He said it gently, which was how he said everything, which was the worst of him. “I sent you up there

because I thought — I'll be honest with you — I thought blood might do what a federal letter couldn't. That was a mistake and I'll own it. But it doesn't change the number." He set the pencil down, squared it to the edge of the desk, and she watched him do it and recognized the gesture as her own, the small ordering of a small thing while a large thing came on. "If Absalom Tipton hasn't signed a voluntary agreement by the fifteenth, the parcel goes to condemnation. I won't have a choice. It goes to the district court in Hawkin County and the government takes it by eminent domain, and they'll take it, Cora, there's not a court in Tennessee will tell the TVA it can't have a man's land for the public good, that fight's been had and lost. The only thing the old man buys by holding out is the manner of the taking."

"And the manner of the taking," Cora said. The camp voice. She kept it level. "What's the difference, to him?"

"To him? Pride, maybe. There's no money in it; condemnation pays the same appraised value, sometimes less, court costs come out of it." Wendell looked at her, and now the gentleness had something underneath it, the thing she had come to think of as the machine showing through the man, the way ledge shows through thin soil. "But it's not the land I'd have you think about. It's the graves."

The stove ticked. Outside a truck ground past in the mud, downshifting for the hill.

"A voluntary agreement," Wendell said, "lets the family manage the disinterment. You consent, you sign, you tell us which stones, you can stand there while it's done if you've the stomach, you can have your own preacher, you choose the new ground. It's a terrible thing but it's a thing you do at the pace of grief. Condemnation isn't like that. When the court takes the parcel, the court takes the cemetery with it, and the court orders the removal, and the court does not do anything at the pace of grief. It sets a date. A fixed date, Cora, written in an order with a judge's name on it, and on that date the removal contractor goes up that ridge and opens every grave on it whether the family's made its peace or not, whether there's a consent signed or not, whether there's a name on the new stone or not. The court doesn't ask. It can't. It's a calendar with a gavel." He spread his tired hands. "I have seen it.

I saw it on the Norris job. A condemnation removal is the ugliest thing this whole sorry business does, and it does some ugly things. And it is faster. That's the cruelty of it — it's faster than mercy. If your father pushes this to court, the one thing he most wants not to happen, the opening of his wife's grave and all the rest of them up there, happens sooner and rougher and on a stranger's say-so. Make him understand that. You're the only one who can."

Cora sat very still. She was thinking, behind her still face, about a soft sandstone marker in the high corner of the ridge with a leaning name on it, ten inches below the red, and about a court order with a fixed date that would send Roy Hicks up that hill to open every grave whether anyone was ready or not — and about how a fixed date was a thing you could not slow, could not manage, could not quietly route to the bottom of a list. A voluntary removal she controlled. She drew the plat. She set the order of work. Condemnation took that out of her hands and put it in a judge's, and a judge in Hawkin County would not know or care that one of those graves should never, on God's earth, be opened in front of the Greers.

She had two clocks now. She had understood that on the ridge with the level, and she understood it wholly now in the warm shanty with the grease-pencil ring on the calendar. The water, rising, indifferent, ten inches and falling. And the legal calendar, the gavel, the fifteenth of November, closing like a hand. They were racing each other to the same grave, and she was caught between them, and the only ground she had left to stand on was the few feet of it she still controlled — the plat, the schedule, the order in which the dead came up.

"I'll talk to him," she said.

"That's all I ask."

It was not all he asked. She knew that. But she let it stand, and gathered her case, and went out into the cold, and did not go to talk to her father.

She walked the camp instead, down the duckboard between the bunkhouses to where the road broke off the bluff and you could see the work. The dam stood across the gorge half its full height, a gray wall going up in the floodlights even now, even in the dark, the

night shift pouring concrete in a glare that turned the whole gorge the color of a struck match, the donkey engines hammering, the river forced through the diversion tunnel below it all with a sound like the world's largest held breath. They never stopped. That was the thing about the machine that no holdout up any hollow seemed able to credit: it did not stop, it did not sleep, it did not grieve, it poured concrete at three in the morning by the light of its own fires and it would be finished by December because December was the number and the number was the thing. Her father stood against that with a chimney and a Scripture and a grave he would not give up. He might as well stand against the weather. He might as well stand against the dark.

And yet she understood him standing there, watching the night pour, better than she understood Wendell or Knoxville or the clean ring on the calendar. Her father at least knew what he was refusing to let go of. The machine had no idea what it was taking; that was its innocence and its horror both; it took a churchyard with the same indifference it took a cornfield, by the foot, by the elevation, all of it just so much country below a number. She had thrown in with the machine. She wore its trousers and drove its truck and drew its maps and she was, this very night, going to use its own cold language — *elevation, marginal, defer, pending* — to do the one thing the machine could never do, which was to care, terribly, particularly, about which grave came up and when. She was going to hide a thing inside the machine's own indifference, the way you hide a letter in a book nobody reads.

She turned from the bluff and the glare and went back up the duckboard to the dark removal office.

She lit a lamp at the long table, after the camp had gone quiet, and rolled out her own plat of Burnt Ridge cemetery under her hands, and she did the thing she had been telling herself for three days she would not do.

She did not forge it. Not yet. She told herself that very carefully, lining the words up in her head the way she lined up figures: she was not changing a single number, not falsifying a single name, she was only — *scheduling*. The disinterment order. The sequence in which Roy Hicks's crew would work the ridge. It was hers to

set; she had set it; it was a column in her own field book and a note in the corner of the plat, *order of removal*, one through forty-some, the graves to come up in the order she had numbered them. And she had numbered them, three days ago, sweeping down the slope from the church, the Renfros and the Buckles infants low and early, the Sealys, her mother, and the high Tipton corner — the black-lichened grandparents and the leaning sandstone lie — she had numbered last only by accident of where they sat.

Now she made it on purpose.

She took a fresh pen and in the corner of the plat, in her small upright hand, she wrote out the order of removal as a list, and she put the Tipton plot at the very bottom of it, dead last, parcel 44, 45, 46, the highest corner below the line, the last to come up — and beside it, in the clerk's voice that lived in her hand, a note that was every word of it true and every word of it a lie of arrangement: *Tipton plot — highest of graves below taking line, marginal, recommend defer to final phase pending elevation confirmation and family consent*. True. Of the graves that had to move, the plot was the highest. It was marginal — ten inches was marginal. Elevation confirmation was a real thing a real surveyor might recommend. Family consent was the law. Every clause of it would stand up to any man who read it. And the sum of it, the whole purpose of it, was to push that one grave to the very last day the water and the gavel allowed, to buy hours, to buy days, to put the opening of Asa Greer's grave off and off and off until — until what, she did not let herself finish. Until the water took it before the crew got to it. Until the gates closed and the ridge went under with the lie still in the dark where it belonged.

She sat back and looked at what she had written and her hand was steady and the lamp hissed and she felt, sitting there, the two halves of herself that she had kept in separate columns her whole life come up against each other at last across the inked rectangles of the dead.

The one half said: *this is craft*. This is what a good surveyor does. You sequence the work by elevation and access and consent; you defer the marginal parcels; you manage the calendar. There was not a clause on that plat she could not defend to Wendell, to

a judge, to God. It was true. It was all true.

The other half, the one that had stood on the bank at the ford when she was fourteen and had carried a creek stone in her hand and the print of it in her palm for fifteen years, said quietly: *you know what you are doing*. You learned this as a child. You learned that you could let a true thing — a drowning, an accident, a plain fact — stand in front of a buried thing and the world would read the true thing and never look behind it. You are doing it again. You are using the truth as a stone over the truth. You always could. It is the one thing you are better at than anyone.

Cora capped the pen. She rolled the plat. She put out the lamp and sat in the dark of the warm shanty with the grease-pencil ring on the calendar she could no longer see, and she told herself, in the camp voice, in the United States Government voice, the voice that read a place true while it came apart, that she had a number to make and two clocks to beat and a father to save from a court and a brother to spare and an old grief on a falling-down porch to keep from breaking open, and that all of that was reason enough, was reason and to spare, and that a person could do a wrong thing for so many right reasons that the wrong of it disappeared, the way ten inches of ground disappears under eighty feet of water, gone, unmeasurable, a thing nobody would ever stand on the bank and read again.

She almost believed it. She was good at almost believing it. She had practiced all her life.

But she sat in the dark a long time before she went to her bed, and the last thing she did before she rose was to reach across the table by feel and find the rolled plat and lay her hand flat on it, the way the old man had said he laid his hand on the graves in the dark and knew whose they were, and she held it there, knowing whose it was, knowing exactly whose, and not letting go.

Chapter Twelve — Brother

Dewey Tipton had not slept a whole night in longer than he could rightly count. A man got so he wore his tiredness the way he wore his coat — a thing that hung on him and went where he went and that he no longer remarked on, because to remark on it would have meant taking it off, and he could not take it off. He woke that morning before light, as he always did, in the gray cold of the rented house with Ruth warm against his back and June fretting somewhere in her crib, and he lay a moment in the dark and felt the day come down on him like a weight set on a man already carrying one, and then he got up, because that was the only thing there had ever been to do.

He built the fire and put the coffee on and stood at the window while it heated. Out across the bottom the corn shocks stood in the frost, his corn, leaning their gray tents in the field he did not own and had farmed on the halves for eleven years, and beyond them the willows by the slough had gone underwater in the night. The slough had crept up over its bank and lay out flat and silver where there had been mud and sedge a week ago. The water was coming. It came a little every day, quiet, with no fuss, the way the worst things came, and there was nothing in it loud enough to wake the children.

He should have felt grief. He heard it in the other men's voices down at the camp store, the ones still holding on, the catch in their throats when they talked about the home place going under. Dewey nodded and said it was a shame, a hard thing, and he meant it the way you mean a thing you have agreed to mean. But underneath, in the place a man does not show, there was something else, and

the something else was so close to gladness that it frightened him worse than the water did.

He was going to get out. That was the truth he could not say to Ruth, could not say to anybody, could barely turn over in the dark of his own head. The dam was going to take this hollow, this whole valley that had held his people a hundred years and broken every one of them in turn, and it was going to give him money to leave it, and he was going to take that money and go and never come back, and he could not look at the rising water without feeling, God forgive him, like a man watching the door of a jail swing open.

He had signed in March. First of anybody above the lower flat, first of the Tiptons by a long way, before his father even knew the papers had come — signed in the camp office with Pruitt sliding the sheets across the desk one at a time and the pen scratching and his own hand not shaking at all, steady as you please, while some part of him stood off to the side and marveled at how easy it was, after all these years, to let go of a thing you had been chained to. He had told Ruth it was the sensible play, get in early, get a clean appraisal before the section filled up with holdouts and condemnations and the price went sour. That was true. It was even smart. But it was not why.

He had signed first to get off the ground.

That was the whole of it, and he had never told a living soul, and he never would. He could not stand on this ground anymore. Some mornings, walking out to the field in the dark, he would come up on the river smell sudden where the path dipped toward the ford, and it would take him by the throat, the cold green river smell, and for a second he would be nineteen years old again with his fists wet and a boy going down in the high water and not coming up, and he would have to stop on the path and put his hand on a fence rail and wait for it to pass. Fifteen years. It did not pass. It waited in the ground like a root, and the ground was his to walk every day, and the only way a man could ever get shut of it was if the ground itself were taken away and drowned and made into something a person could not walk on, could not get to, could not stand on the exact spot and feel it come up through his boots.

The water was going to do for him what fifteen years of praying

had not. It was going to put the place where he killed Asa Greer eighty feet under, and a man cannot walk on the bottom of a lake.

He drank his coffee standing up. Lonnie came out, ten years old and already long in the leg, hair every which way, and stood by the stove rubbing his eyes, and Dewey put a hand on the boy's head and felt the warmth of him and thought, not for the first time, that everything he had done and not done was in the end about this — about getting these three out of the hollow before it took them too, the way it had taken his sister off to the north and his mother into the ground and his father into a stubbornness that was its own kind of grave. Pearl would be up next, then the baby. In seventy days the gates would close, and Dewey Tipton would load a wagon and drive his family out of Cane Hollow and let the water have the rest.

If only the old man would sign.

That was the bone in it, the thing that kept the gladness from being clean. As long as Absalom would not sign there was a thread holding Dewey to the place, because a man cannot leave his father standing on a hilltop waiting to drown, however much the father deserves it, and Absalom deserved a good deal in Dewey's accounting. He let the thought come because he was alone with the fire and could afford it. The old man got to be the martyr. There it was, the ugly true shape of it. Absalom got to stand on the ridge above Verlie's grave and refuse the government and let the whole valley call him a hard old saint, holding to his dead, while Dewey did the actual work of leaving — signed the papers, took the money, packed the wagon — and got called, behind his hand, the one who sold out. The old man kept his pride by making Dewey spend his.

And there was a worse thing under that, and Dewey made himself look at it the way you look at a wound to see if it has gone bad. His father was protecting him. Dewey had known it fifteen years and had never once been able to say thank you, because to say thank you would be to say out loud the thing they had both agreed never to say — that the boy in the ground had not drowned, not the way the stone said, not the way the county wrote it down. Absalom had carried it. Absalom had stood in front of the county and in front of God and let it be a drowning, had cut a lie into a

stone with his own broken hand and set it over the grave, and had never once, in fifteen years, put a word of blame on his son. And Dewey had let him. He had taken the shelter of it and farmed and married and got children under it, and the price of the shelter was that he had to believe what he believed — that he, Dewey, had done it. That his fists had done it. He had come down to the ford that night and found Asa with his hands on Cora, fourteen years old and crying, and something had gone red in him, and he had put Asa Greer on the ground, and the river had taken what Dewey left. That was murder however you cut a stone, and his father had spent fifteen years keeping the county from ever knowing it.

He owed the old man his life. He hated him for it. Both things sat in him at once and had for so long he had stopped trying to make them lie down together.

* * *

He saw Cora that afternoon, by the church, by accident or near enough.

He had come down to Renfro's for a bag of meal and seen the TVA truck pulled off by the cemetery road, and he had told himself he would not stop, and he had stopped. She was up among the graves with the boy Sealy, the two of them small against the gray sky, Cora bent over that little brass instrument on its legs and the boy off a way holding the striped rod straight up, and the stakes of the survey going in among the headstones bright with their bands of red, and Dewey stood at the foot of the cemetery road with the meal sack on his shoulder and watched his sister measure the place where their dead lay and felt the old anger come up in him simple and clean, almost a relief after the complicated kind.

She had got out. That was the long and short of what he held against her, and it was not fair and he knew it was not fair and he held it anyway. She had been fourteen and she had gone — gone north, gone to her classes and her clean wages and her trousers and her flat city way of talking — and she had left him in the hollow with the ground and the river and the thing they had done, left him to farm over it and watch their mother die over it, while she made herself into a person who could come back fifteen years later and put the graves on a piece of paper like they were corners of a field.

She had carried none of it. Or so it looked to him from the foot of the road. She had set it down the day she crossed the county line and let him pick it up, and here she was come home to draw the map of the drowning, cool as creek water, and the government paid her to do it.

He went up the road among the graves.

“Dewey,” she said, when she straightened from the instrument and saw him. She said it careful. She had always been careful with him, even as a girl, the way you are careful with a dog you are not sure of.

“They put you on the cemetery,” he said.

“They put me on the whole parcel.” She glanced at Junior Sealy, and the boy took the rod and drifted off down the slope to give them the room, and Dewey marked that, that even the boy knew there was a thing between them that wanted privacy. “The cemetery is first because the removal crew wants it first.”

“The removal crew.” Dewey set the meal sack down on a flat old stone, lichen-eaten, a name on it nobody living could read anymore. “That is a soft way to say grave robbers.”

“It is the way it is said.” She did not rise to it. She never had — another thing he held against her, that she would not fight, that she stood there in her trousers reading him like a number off a rod. “They have to be moved, Dewey. By law. Everything below the line. They will be taken up and carried to Sawmill Ridge and put down again, decent, with the stones, and the families can be there.”

“Mama too.”

“Mama too.” Something moved in her face then, and he was almost sorry, and he hardened against being sorry. “I will do Mama myself. I will not let Roy Hicks’s men do Mama. I have already said so.”

Dewey looked away from her, out over the cemetery, down the slope to where the river lay flat and pewter and rising. From up here you could see the red band on the far stakes run right across the lower corner of the burying ground, run through it like a fence drawn by a man who did not care what he fenced.

“Where is the line?” he asked. “On the ridge here. Where does it run?”

She did not answer right away, and he turned and looked at her, and he knew before she said it. He had known, maybe, since March. He had signed and got off the ground and never once let himself think the ground would not stay buried, would not stay safe under the lie his father cut into it, and now his sister stood among the stakes with her steady ink-stained hands and would not look at him, and he knew.

"It runs below the Tipton plot," she said finally, low. "By inches. The plot is below the line, Dewey. All of it."

"Then they will dig it."

"They will dig all of it."

He felt the cold come into him that had nothing to do with the wind. He thought of what was under the stone — the false name and the true bones, the boy of nineteen with the cracked head lying these fifteen years under a baby's name — and of Roy Hicks's men coming up this ridge with their picks and their numbered boxes and lifting that stone and opening that ground, and he thought, with a clarity that nearly put him on his knees among the graves, that the water was not going to save him after all. The water could not come until the graves were moved, and the graves could not be moved without being opened, and the one grave that must never be opened was going to be opened first, by law, by his own sister's map.

"Let it go under," he said.

She looked at him.

"Cora. Listen to me." He took a step toward her and she did not back away, though something in her wanted to; he could see it. "Leave that one. Whatever you have to do. Lose it off your paper. You are the one drawing it, you put the numbers on the graves. Mark it gone, mark it moved already, mark it anything. Let the water take it the way it is. Water keeps secrets, Cora. It is the one thing on God's earth that keeps a secret. You put a thing under eighty foot of water and it is kept forever, ain't a man living going down after it." His voice had gone rough and he did not care. "You leave Asa Greer in the ground and let the lake come over him and it is done. After all these years it can finally be done."

She was very still. The wind moved her dark hair under the felt

hat and she looked at him, and there was a thing in her gray eyes he could not read, and he had the sudden lurching feeling that she was reading him entirely, that she always had — that the careful little sister who would not fight had seen all the way down into him for fifteen years and never said.

“Why does it matter so much to you,” she said slowly, “that it stay buried?”

And he could not say it. He stood among his family’s graves with the river rising at his back and the thing he had carried for fifteen years came right up to his teeth — *because I killed him, because it was me, and my father has spent his life keeping the county from knowing it, and I will not have it dug up now, not when I am so close to getting out.* He could not say it to her any more than he could say it to Ruth or to God. So he shouldered the meal sack and stood there a moment more, and what came out of him in the end was not the truth, but it was as near to it as he had ever come.

“Because some of us stayed,” he said. “And some of us have to keep on living right here over it, right up until the day the water comes. You got to go. I never. So you do not get to come back now and open it up just because the government give you a pencil.” He turned to go down the road. Then he stopped, and without looking at her, he said the other thing, quieter, and it cost him more than the anger had. “Sign or don’t. But get the old man off that ridge before the gates close, Cora. He is going to stand up there and let it come over him. I cannot make him move. Maybe you can. He always did set more store by you, for all you left.”

He went down the cemetery road and did not look back at her standing among the graves, and behind him he heard the small steady scratch start up again, his sister writing something in her book, turning the ridge and its dead and its lie into a line in a column. He thought, going down toward the rising water that he had come to think of as his deliverance and now feared as his betrayer, that he had asked her to do for him the one thing she had spent her whole life learning how to do — to take a true place and draw it false, and make the false thing hold.

Chapter Thirteen — The Plat

She told herself, afterward, that the line had already been crossed long ago, on a riverbank, by a girl with a creek stone in her hand, and that everything since was only the same crossing made again in a steadier hand. She told herself a great many things. That was the trouble with being able to read a thing true: you could read your own reasons just as clear, and watch yourself not believe them, and do the thing anyway.

The plat was nearly finished. She had spent three days on Burnt Ridge with Junior and the level rod, and three nights at the drawing board in the corner of the camp office that Wendell Frame had cleared for her, and the cemetery had become, under her hands, what it always became: a clean abstraction on linen, a rectangle of measured ground with the church footprint at the north end and the rows of graves laid out in their plots, each grave a small numbered rectangle, each rectangle keyed to a column in the field book where she had written, where the stones allowed, the name and the dates. The Greer plot. The Tipton plot. The old unmarked ground at the lower corner where the slope fell toward the river, where the early dead lay under fieldstones and the contour ran the red elevation through the grass at 1,068, drowning the bottom row by inches.

It was good work. That was the thing she could not get past, sitting at the board in the kerosene light with the office gone quiet and cold around her and the men all down at the bunkhouse. It was very good work. The lettering was clean and small and even, the north arrow true, the scale exact, the whole doomed acre rendered so that a man who had never set foot in Cane Hollow could stand at Sawmill Ridge a year from now and lay out the new cemetery

to match, grave for grave, and put every body back down in the same order it had lain in for a century. That was what the plat was for. It was an act of preservation. It was the thing that would let the dead be carried up out of the flood and set down again in their right relation, the Tiptons by the Tiptons and the Greers by the Greers, so that the drowning of the place would not also be the scattering of its people. She had drawn it to save them. She believed that. It was the truest thing the work could be.

And in the lower corner of the Tipton plot was a small rectangle she had numbered 14, and in the field book against the number she had written, in her own small upright hand, *Asa Tipton 1880*, copied faithful off the stone, the way she copied everything faithful, and that small rectangle and those four words were the lie at the center of the true map, and she had drawn them as carefully as all the rest, and they would route Roy Hicks's crew straight to the grave that held Asa Greer.

Wendell Frame had stood at her shoulder that afternoon and admired it. He did not know what he was admiring. He had come through the office with his coat still on and his cold pipe in his teeth and stopped at the board the way he always stopped, rocking on his heels, pleased, and he had looked down at the cemetery taking shape on the linen and said it was the cleanest plat he had seen come out of the section, that Knoxville would want it for a model, that he wished half his draftsmen had a tenth of her hand. He had meant it kindly. He meant most things kindly; that was the trouble with Wendell, that he was not a villain, that he believed in the dam the way a man believes in the morning, and that he had set a true believer's faith in her precision and never once suspected that the precision could be turned. *You draw a grave so a man can find it again*, he had said, tapping the glass of his unlit pipe against a row of little numbered rectangles. *That is the whole mercy of the thing. We take them up and we put them back down right.* And he had gone on to his supper, and left her alone with the mercy and the lie, which on her sheet were drawn in the same ink and could not be told apart.

She had thought it through every way. She had lain awake on the cot in her camp room thinking it through, the way she thought

through a closure that would not close, looking for the error in the survey. There was no clean way. If the grave was opened — and grave 14 sat below the red and the law said open it — then Roy Hicks would lift the stone that said an infant of 1880 and find the long bones of a grown man and the seams of a young skull still showing, and he would say what he always said, that bones do not lie and stones do, and there would be a notice to the county, and an identification, and a fifteen-year-old drowning would walk up out of the water it had been kept under, and it would take Dewey with it, and her father, and her, and the whole merciful structure of silence her family had built and lived inside would come down like a barn with the sills rotted out.

Unless the grave was not opened. Unless it was carried up unexamined, one numbered box among forty, set down at Sawmill Ridge under a fresh fieldstone with no name and no question, in the general way they handled the old unmarked dead — the ones whose stones had gone illegible, the ones nobody claimed, lifted gently and reburied in the common ground because there was nobody left to say who they were. The TVA did it every week. There was a procedure for it. It was on the form. *Unmarked — relocate to common ground, Sawmill Ridge*. You did not open an unmarked grave to inspect it. You did not need to. There was no name to confirm, no family to summon, no identification to make. You took it up whole and you carried it whole and you put it down whole, and the bones inside it were the county's business never, because the bones inside an unmarked grave were, by definition, nobody's.

All she had to do was unmark it.

She sat at the board a long time with the pen dry in her hand. She had drawn the grave true — number 14, *Asa Tipton 1880*, keyed and lettered and exact — and all the work she had ever done and the whole of who she had made herself stood between her and what she was about to do, because Cora Tipton did not falsify a survey. That was the bedrock. A man could trust a thing she had drawn the way her father trusted Scripture, completely, and that trust was the only thing she owned that the hollow had not given her and could not take back. She had spent three years of nights earning the right to be believed on paper. She measured so she

would not have to feel; she had known that about herself for a long time; but the other side of it, the side she was proud of, was that what she measured was *so*. It was true. The numbers did not bend for fear or grief or family. That was the whole of her religion, and she was sitting in a cold office at midnight about to break it on purpose.

When she was fourteen she had broken it by keeping still. She had stood on the bank and said nothing — said nothing about the stone in her hand, said nothing about Asa's hands on her, said it was a drowning because her father told her to say it was a drowning, and a girl's silence was a small thing, a held breath, you could almost believe it was not a lie at all but only an absence of words. She had carried that absence north and built a whole life on the far side of it. She had told herself, all these years, that she had never actually lied. She had only failed to speak. There was a difference, and she had lived in the difference fifteen years.

There was no difference now. Now she would take the pen and the ink and her own true hand and she would make a federal record say a thing that was not so, and there would be no held-breath softness about it, no child's silence, no failing-to-speak. It would be an act. It would be ink on linen that she had laid there on purpose, knowing it false, so that a crime would go down whole and unexamined under eighty feet of water and a guilty family could go on being believed. She would be, for the first time in her grown life, exactly the kind of person who could not be trusted to draw a thing true.

She thought of Dewey at the foot of the cemetery road, the meal sack on his shoulder, the thing in his face he could not say. *Water keeps secrets*. She thought of her father on the ridge, the broken hand that never closed, the stone he had cut with it. She thought of her mother in the ground that was also below the line, Verlie who had sung the old songs over the dishes, Verlie who had — Cora understood this only dimly, would not understand it fully for weeks yet — done the same thing once herself, taken a dead boy and given him the name of her own lost baby, a falsification, a forgery written in earth and stone, and called it, in whatever language her grief spoke, mercy. Maybe it ran in the hands. Maybe it was the

one craft the Tiptons truly had, the making of a kind lie that would hold.

She took up the eraser first, the soft gum, and she worked it gentle over the four small lettered words in the field-book key, *Asa Tipton 1880*, and they came up off the paper in pale crumbs and a smudge, fifteen years and a false name and a true boy rubbed away under her thumb, and the rectangle sat there empty and numbered 14 and waiting. Her hand was steady. She noted that it was steady, the way she had noted at the ford that her hand was steady on the stone, and the steadiness was its own kind of verdict and she did not let herself hear it.

She made herself say it plain, in the cold of the office, to settle her hand for the doing of it. It was not a crime. She tried the word on and it would not fit. A crime was a thing that took from somebody, and who did this take from? Not from Asa, who was past taking from, who would lie just as quiet in the common ground at Sawmill Ridge as in the named ground on Burnt Ridge, and lie there under a kinder anonymity than the false name he wore now. Not from Ila, who did not want her boy raised at all, who had begged them all these years to leave the dead alone — was it not closer to Ila's own wish, to carry him up gently and not pry into him? Not from the government, which wanted only the line cleared and the boxes filled and the contour swept of the dead, and would have its line cleared just the same. It took from no one. It only kept. It kept Dewey out of a courtroom and her father off a gallows of talk and her mother's strange grieving mercy from being dug up and gawked at by men with picks. It was preservation. She was a preserver of things; that was her whole trade; she took places that were about to be lost and she fixed them so they would not be wholly lost, and what was this but the same — taking a truth that could only do harm now and fixing it so the harm would go down quiet under the water and stay down. That was not a lie. That was mercy with a steady hand. She almost had herself believing it. She had spent fifteen years getting good at this particular arithmetic, the kind that came out even no matter what you carried into it, and she ran the figures one more time and they came out even, and somewhere underneath, in the place the figures never reached, she

knew exactly what she was about to do and did it anyway.

Then she dipped the pen, and in the cleared space, in the small upright hand that could be trusted, she wrote: *Unmarked — stone illegible — relocate to common ground, Sawmill Ridge.*

The ink stood up wet and black and then dried, and it was done, and it looked exactly as true as everything else on the sheet. That was the horror of it and the mercy of it both. It looked true. A man would lay out the new cemetery from this plat and never know that one box in the common ground held a named and murdered boy under a forged anonymity, never know that the cartographer had loved him once and killed him a little and was now, at last, in adult and deliberate ink, finishing the job of hiding him. It would hold. She had made it hold. She was very good at her work.

She blotted the line and capped the pen and sat in the kerosene light with the finished plat in front of her, the whole doomed acre rendered perfect and false in the one place that mattered, and she did not feel the relief she had told herself she would feel. She felt the cold of the office and the weight of the dark beyond the window where the hollow lay filling, and she felt, somewhere under the steadiness, the girl on the bank, fourteen and silent, and she understood that she had not protected that girl after all, not freed her, not carried her up out of the water. She had only gone back down to the bank and stood beside her and taken the stone out of her hand and put down the pen in its place, and called it preservation, and called it mercy, and signed it true.

Chapter Fourteen — 1921: The Locket

In the early summer she was fourteen and she believed, with the whole of her unmeasured heart, that Asa Greer was the best thing the hollow had ever made or ever would, and that she had been singled out by some grace she did not understand to be the one he came for. He was nineteen. He played the fiddle so that grown men stopped their talk to listen, and he could make the dance tunes sound like they were laughing at you and the slow ones sound like they knew something about you that you had not told. He had a way of looking at a person, head a little tipped, half a grin held back, that made you feel you were the only thing in the holler worth looking at. He had looked at Cora that way since the spring, down by the ford, where she was not supposed to go and went, and she had carried the look around inside her like a coal she was afraid to let go out.

It was already going wrong by then. She could see it now, fifteen years and a whole life later, see it the way you see a flaw in a thing you have measured a hundred times — but she could not see it then, or would not, which were the same thing in a girl of fourteen. The fiddle came out less. The grin came slower and had a meanness folded into it she had not seen the spring before. He owed money down the river; she gathered that much from the way Dewey's voice went low and careful when Asa's name came up, the way her brother had started watching Asa the way you watch weather. There was the still, and the trouble that came with the still, the federal man somebody had seen at Coldwater, the reward that men talked about in the half-joking way men talk about a thing that frightens them. And there was the drink. Asa had always taken a drink. By that

summer the drink had begun to take Asa, and when it had him his eyes went flat and far back and the boy she loved went somewhere she could not follow and left a stranger sitting in his clothes.

The bad evening came in June.

She had slipped down to the ford at dusk because he had told her to, in a voice that was not the asking voice, and she had gone because by then his telling had become its own kind of weather she leaned into without thinking. He was there on the flat rock above the deep hole, and the smell of him reached her before she was close — the corn liquor, sour and sweet — and she knew before she saw his eyes that it was the stranger and not Asa, and some animal sense in her wanted to turn back up the path, and she did not, because she was fourteen and she had been told to come.

He was in a black humor about the money. She never did get the whole of it, only the shape — somebody had pressed him, or he was afraid of being pressed, and he was talking ugly about who he might tell what, talking about the reward like it was a door he might walk through, and Dewey's name was in it, and her father's, and Cora stood on the gravel and tried to talk him soft the way you would a horse, and that was her mistake, the soft talk, because it turned him.

He took her by the arm.

That was all it was, the first of it — a hand closed too hard on her arm above the elbow, and the closing went on past anything that could be play or temper, went on into a place that was about hurting, his fingers grinding down to the bone of her, and his face came close to hers with the liquor on it and the flat far-back eyes, and he said a thing low that she would not let herself remember the words of, only the heat of it and the wrongness, and then his other hand came up and took her by the jaw, fingers and thumb in her cheeks, and turned her face up to his the way you turn a thing you mean to do as you please with. It was not a kiss. It was a showing-her. It was him showing her that he could, that the looking and the grin and the singling-out had been a kind of ground he had been laying, and that the ground was his now, and she was standing on it.

She got loose. She did not know to this day exactly how — a

twist, a cry, his own unsteadiness on the wet rock — but she got her arm free and her face free and she went up the bank fast with her heart going like a struck thing, and behind her he laughed, and the laugh was the worst part, because it was so easy, because it cost him nothing, because she understood from the ease of it that to him the whole of it had been nothing, a small thing, a thing a man did and laughed at, and that she was a fool fourteen-year-old who had let a coal she was afraid to let go out burn her hand to the bone.

She had a mark on her arm for a week. Four ovals, blue going green going yellow, where his fingers had been. She wore her sleeves down and told her mother nothing. She told nobody. Already, that summer, before the worse night, she had begun the silence she would carry the rest of her life.

She watched Dewey, those weeks, and said nothing to him most of all. He was twenty then, broad through the shoulders, gone hard from the field work, and he and Asa were thick as ever on the surface of things — out at night together about the still, coming in at gray dawn smelling of corn mash and creek mud, thumping each other and laughing in the lot like the boys they had been. But she had begun to see the watchfulness in her brother that summer, the way his eyes followed Asa when Asa was not looking, the way his jaw set when Asa got to talking too loud about the money he was owed and the money he might get. Dewey knew Asa was turning. Dewey did not know about the ford, about the arm, about the jaw and the laugh; she made sure he did not, because she understood, even at fourteen, that if Dewey knew it would not stay a small thing, that her brother loved her with a plain hard love that would not laugh anything off, and that whatever he did when he found out would be worse than the bruise and would land on all of them. So she kept it, the way she would keep everything after, and she went about the cabin helping her mother put up beans in the July heat and listening to Verlie sing the long sad ballads over the kettle, the ones about girls who went down to the water to meet their false lovers, and Cora hummed along and did not hear them, did not once hear what they were telling her, because she was already planning, in the part of her that the songs could not reach, how she might win

him back.

* * *

And here was the thing she could not make sense of, then or ever, the thing that shamed her worst of all the shaming things, worse than the silence, worse even than the stone she would pick up at the same ford four weeks later: she did not stop loving him. Or if it was not love it wore love's clothes so close she could not tell them apart, and a girl of fourteen has no instrument for the telling. She lay awake with the marks aching on her arm and she did not think, *he is dangerous, he has shown me what he is, I must keep clear of him*. She thought, *I have done something wrong and lost him, and I must do something to get him back*. That was the whole twisting of it. He had hurt her, and she had read the hurt as her own failure, as proof she was losing him, and the losing frightened her more than the hurt, because the hurt was over in a week and the losing would be forever, and so the fear of the losing reached down and took the fear of the hurt and turned it inside out and made it into a reason to go to him again.

She understood, fifteen years on, that this was how it worked. She had seen it since in other women and recognized it with a sick lurch like seeing your own hand. The hurt does not push the frightened girl away. It pulls her closer, because she has been taught — in one evening, by one set of fingers on her jaw — that his regard is a thing that can be taken from her, and so she will pay anything to keep it, and the paying is the trap, and the trap is sprung by the very hurt that ought to have warned her out of it.

So she decided to give him the locket.

It was the one thing of worth she owned. It had been her grandmother's, a small brass oval on a brass chain, a flower worked on the front of it gone soft with handling, and it opened on a tiny hinge to two empty ovals inside where pictures were meant to go and never had been. Verlie had given it to her at twelve, the only fine thing in the house that was Cora's own, and Cora had loved it the simple way a child loves a treasure, for its smallness and its shine and its being hers. She kept it in a sock in the bottom of the chest. She took it out the night before she went back to him and she sat on the edge of her rope bed with the one candle and

she opened the little blade of her pocketknife and she scratched her letters inside, on the empty oval where a picture should go, slow and clumsy and pressing hard so it would last: *C.T.* Cora Tipton. So he would have her with him. So that whatever the locket came to mean to him, her name would be inside it, scratched in the brass, where it could not come off.

She did not think of it as a thing that would be found. She thought of it as a thing that would be kept. There is no difference to a girl of fourteen; she had not yet learned the cold grown trade of foreseeing how a kept thing becomes a found thing, how the love-token you press into a boy's hand to bind him to you can become, in another light, in another year, under the patient indifferent water, the one object on earth that names the dead and convicts the living. She knew none of that. She knew only that she was frightened of losing him and that the locket was the most of herself she had to give, and that maybe, if she gave him enough of herself, he would be Asa again and not the stranger, and the flat far-back eyes would warm, and the singling-out would come back, and she would have done something right at last.

She gave it to him at the ford, in the last of the light, the next week. He was sober, or near it, and gentle, the way he could still sometimes be, the way that undid her every time. There was a bottle in the grass by his foot, corked, untouched as far as she could tell, and she took that for a sign too, the way she took everything that summer for a sign of what she wanted. He took the little brass oval in his fingers and looked at it and turned it and found the catch with his thumbnail and opened it and saw her letters scratched inside, *C.T.*, and something crossed his face that she chose, that she desperately chose, to read as tenderness, though it might only have been surprise that a thing so plain had been given, and he closed it up and put the chain over his head and dropped the locket down inside his shirt against his chest, and he smiled at her the old slow held-back smile, and she felt the coal flare up warm in her again and thought, *there, there, I have got him back, I have done it.*

It was the second week of July. He had eleven days to live, though no one in the holler knew it, least of all Cora, who walked

back up the path in the dark with her grandmother's locket gone from her and her whole heart given away and a green-yellow shadow of bruise still faintly on her arm, glad, God help her, simply glad, the way only the young and the doomed and the half-loved can be glad — emptied out and grateful for the emptying, and certain, the way she would never be certain of anything again, that she had saved something.

She had not saved anything. She had wound the last thread of the snare. In eleven days the boy with her name scratched against his chest would frighten and hurt her worse, at the same ford, on the wet rocks above the same deep hole, and she would have a creek stone in her hand, and her brother would come, and her father would come, and the high water would take Asa Greer down with her grandmother's locket and her own two letters still inside his shirt, and they would bury him under a baby's name and a cut stone, and the locket would go down into the ground with the bones and the lie and lie there fifteen years, patient as the river, keeping her secret and her sentence both, waiting for the water to be stopped and the ground to be opened and her name to be lifted up at last into the light.

Chapter Fifteen — Slack Time

For three days the work went slow, the way it goes when the worst of a thing is coming but not yet come, and Cora learned there was a kind of time the survey had no name for — a time between — and that it was the hardest of all to stand in.

The cemetery was platted. The fields were staked. The consents that could be got had been got, and the ones that could not — the Tipton parcel, the Greer plot, Ila's flat refusal sitting in the file like a stone in a shoe — had gone up the line to men in offices who would decide them in their own season. Roy Hicks's crew was working the far end of the valley, the Sealy churchyard and the little Renfro family ground, and would not reach Burnt Ridge for a week, maybe two. There was nothing for Cora to measure that she had not already measured. The numbers were all written down. The place was on paper, every distance and corner of it, and the paper waited in the drafting room at Coldwater the way a coffin waits in a barn loft, finished, lidless, patient.

So she had time. She had the one thing she had crossed half the country to keep from having, which was time to look.

She walked the lower hollow in the long gold afternoons because there was nowhere else she could bear to be. The camp office was full of men talking quotas and gate dates. The drafting room held her own finished plat. The road up to the ridge held her father. So she walked the bottoms, down where the work was done, down where the water had already come.

It had come quietly. That was the thing she had not been ready for — that the drowning of a place did not announce itself, did not roar, but crept. The backwater had no current to speak of. It

simply stood, a little higher each morning than the morning before, filling the low ground the way milk fills a tilted pan, finding the levels a river never bothered with. Dewey's bottom field, where the corn shocks had leaned their frost-tents three weeks ago, was a sheet of still brown water now, and the shocks stood in it to their knees, and their reflections stood down in the water with them, doubled, so that the field looked twice as deep as the world. A fence ran out from the bank and into the flood and kept going, post by post, until the posts were only their own tops, a row of dark knuckles trailing off across the surface to nowhere, and then not even that.

She stood at the edge of it for a long while. She had a surveyor's eye and she could not turn it off; she read the elevation by the drowned fence, counted the rails gone under, did the arithmetic of how many feet the pool had risen and how many it had left to rise. Forty more. Fifty. The water was not yet half of what it meant to be. The thing she was looking at was not a flood. It was the foot of a thing standing up.

She had grown up reading this river the way other children read a clock. You could tell the season by where the Pigeonroost sat on its gravel — knew the spring rise by the willow roots, the August low by the bald white bars, the killing freshets by the trash hung high in the sycamores. A river was a thing that moved, that told the time of the year against its banks, that her father had read every morning of his life off the back porch the way he read the sky. This standing water told nothing. It had stopped being a clock. It sat at whatever height the men three miles down had decided on overnight, and it would sit a little higher tomorrow, and there was no season in it at all, no time, only the slow filling. A river was a verb. They had made it a noun. They had taken the one moving thing in the valley and made it lie still, and the stillness was the most unnatural thing she had ever stood in front of, stiller than the dead, stiller than her father's stubbornness, a stillness that was only the long held breath before the rest of it came down.

And it was beautiful. That was the part she could not get past, the part that shamed her. The still water held the ridges upside down, held the whole burning hillside of October — the sumac gone scarlet, the poplars gone gold, the dark wedges of cedar — held it all

perfect and motionless on its surface so that there were two hollows now, the one that was dying and the one floating drowned beneath it, and the second was, if anything, the lovelier of the two, because nothing in it could be touched or carried off or made to sign. A heron stood in Dewey's field on a corn shock, gray and unbothered, and when it lifted and went over the water its reflection rose to meet it and they touched at the waterline and parted, and Cora watched it out of sight and had to put her hand over her mouth.

The houses were the worst of the beauty.

They had begun moving the houses, or taking them, depending on whose mouth told it. Some had gone whole. Cora had watched, from the road one morning, a crew jack a cabin off its stones and roll it down to the river on peeled logs and float it away on a barge of lashed timber, a whole house riding low on the slackwater, its windows giving back the sky, its chimney trailing no smoke, going down the valley like a thing in a dream to be set up again on some ridge above the line where it would never look right, never sit square to the weather it was built for. She thought it the saddest thing she had ever seen until she saw the other kind.

She had walked down past the slough where the Sealys had lived, the willows Junior had staked his own people under, and the cabin was gone — moved or burned, she could not tell, only that there was a square of paler ground where it had sat, a rectangle of earth the sun had not touched in sixty years, suddenly bared to the light, with the four corner stones still set and nothing standing on them. A house leaves a shadow when it goes. She had not known that. The whole hollow was filling up with these pale rectangles, the footprints of vanished rooms, and the water was creeping toward them across the bottoms, and soon the footprints too would be under, and then there would be no record at all that anyone had lived here but the one she herself had drawn, the plat folded in the drafting room, the place reduced to ink. That was the only Cane Hollow that would outlast the winter — hers. The thought sat in her like swallowed stone.

The other kind they burned.

The houses too poor or too far gone to move, the barns, the sheds, the corn cribs — the crews put fire to them rather than leave

them to foul the pool, and at evening the hollow filled with a low smoke that smelled of a hundred years of woodstove and tar paper and cured hay, and the light went strange and orange under it, and Cora would come around a shoulder of the road and there would be a house she had known all her life standing wide open to the flames inside it, the fire showing in every window at once, the whole frame of someone's life lit up gold and hollow as a jack-lantern, and no one watching but her and the man with the kerosene can. They did not let the families watch. That was a mercy somebody up the line had thought of. They moved the people out first and then they came back and burned the empty rooms, and the people were three counties away picking out a new place on Sawmill Ridge while the old one went up, and never had to see it, and Cora saw all of it, because she had nowhere to be and a surveyor's eye she could not shut.

She understood, walking through the smoke in the gold evenings, that she was watching a place be erased and that she had helped draw the map that allowed it, and that the two facts would not cancel each other no matter how she set them side by side. She had thought, in Cincinnati, that to record a thing was to save it. She had built her whole self on it. Here was the lie of it, lit up in every window: you recorded a place exactly so that it could be let go of. The plat was not a rescue. The plat was a permission. You drew the thing true and complete and then you signed it over to the water, and the truer you drew it the cleaner the water could take it, and a botched survey was the only kind that ever saved anybody anything, and hers were never botched.

It was on the third of those evenings that Wendell Frame found her at the water's edge.

She heard the Ford before she saw it, the camp truck taking the rough road slow, and then it stopped behind her and the engine died and after a moment he came down through the broomsedge to where she stood and looked out at what she was looking at — the drowned field, the doubled ridges, the heron's corn shock, the fence walking off into the flood — and for a while he did not say anything at all, which was not like him.

"I keep coming down here," Cora said finally, because his silence

asked her to. "I tell myself it is to check the marks. The marks are fine. There is nothing to check."

"I know why you come down here." Wendell took off his hat and turned it in his hands. He was not a hard man, whatever the camp made of him; that was the trouble with him, that he was not hard, that he believed every word of the deliverance he was bringing — the light, the work, the typhoid gone, the spring floods that would never again take a child off a footlog — and that he believed it kindly, and could not for the life of him see why anyone would grieve to be delivered. "It is the prettiest the hollow has ever been," he said. "Did you ever think it would be pretty?"

"No."

"Me neither." He looked out at it. "The men hate it when I say so. They think it is a low thing to say. But there it is." A coal of orange light showed up the valley where a barn was going. "I have moved four reservoirs' worth of people now, Cora. Four valleys. And every one of them got beautiful right at the end, right when it was half gone — the water in, the people half out, the whole place caught between the one thing and the other. I have come to think it is the most natural thing in the world. A thing is never so lovely as when you can see both what it was and what it is about to be, and cannot tell, standing there, which one is the true one."

Cora said nothing. He had said, without knowing it, the thing she had no words for, and he had said it gently, and she hated how near it brought him.

"Slack water," she said at last.

"What is that?"

"It is a tide word. I read it in a book, on the coast. The sea comes in and the sea goes out, and there is a moment in between, at the turn, when it does neither — when the water is not running in and not running out, just lying there, slack. The sailors called it slack water." She watched the still flood hold the burning ridge. "You cannot tell, in the slack, which way it is fixing to go. It looks like it will stay that way forever. It never does. But for a little while it just — holds. Neither one thing nor the other." She had not meant to say so much. "There is no tide up here. I do not know why I thought of it."

“Slack water,” Wendell said, trying the words. He looked out at the dead-still pool with its drowned fence and its doubled trees, the river that was no longer running anywhere, stopped three miles down by the half-built thing he had given his life to. “Well,” he said quietly. “That is just exactly what it is, isn’t it. We have stopped the river and not yet drowned the valley. It is neither one. It is the slack.”

They stood in it together, then, the two of them, in the slack of the whole world, and the light went down orange through the smoke, and for a moment Cora felt the wall she lived behind go thin as paper. She had carried the thing alone for fifteen years. She had carried it out of these mountains and through the night classes and into the steady hand and the man’s wage, carried it so long and so carefully that she had nearly come to believe it was the foundation she stood on rather than the stone tied to her foot. And here was a kind man who had said her own grief back to her in a word she had given him, standing close enough that she could have set it down. She could feel exactly how it would go — the first sentence, *there is a grave on Burnt Ridge*, and then the second, and then the slack would turn, one way or the other, and she would no longer be standing in the part where you could not tell.

“Wendell,” she said.

“Yes.”

The heron lifted off the corn shock and went down the valley low over the water, and its reflection rose and ran along under it, dark on dark, the bird and its drowned twin keeping pace, and at the bend they both went out of sight together, and Cora watched the place where they had been.

“Nothing,” she said. “I am cold. That is all.”

Something went out of his face — not anger; he was never angry; only a small closing, the door he had left open swinging quietly to. He put his hat back on. “There is coffee in the truck,” he said. “Come up before the dark catches you. The marks are fine. You said so yourself.”

She did not move. He went back up through the broomsedge to the Ford, and she heard him pour the coffee and wait, the door of the truck standing open, the dome of it lit, a small yellow room

hung in the dusk with a man in it being patient, and she stood at the edge of the flood a moment longer in the dark and the smoke, in the dead slack middle of it all, and could not tell — truly could not, standing there — which way she was going to go.

Then she went up to the truck and took the coffee and said it was good, and let him drive her back to the camp through the burning valley, and the water behind them lay flat and bright and held the fires and gave nothing back but light.

Chapter Sixteen — Roy Hicks

Roy Hicks worked the dead the way Cora worked the living — by measurement, by method, by a flat refusal to feel the thing his hands were doing — and the first time she watched him at it she understood that she had met, in this stranger from off the mountain, the only man in the valley who did exactly what she did, and that he was better at it than she was, and that this was very bad for her.

She had come up to the little Renfro family ground above the store because the consent forms wanted a witnessing signature from the survey, which was the kind of errand the camp invented to keep her hands busy in the slack, and she had told herself it had nothing to do with watching Roy Hicks. She had told herself a number of things that autumn.

She had heard the camp talk before she ever saw him work. The men told it admiring and uneasy both, the way men tell of a thing they are glad they do not have to do. Roy Hicks had come up from a job on the Hiwassee and before that one on a Carolina river whose name she did not catch, and before that the war, where they said he had been on a detail that did this same work for the army on the far side of the ocean, lifting boys out of one ground to lay them in another, and that he had simply never stopped, had followed the work home across an ocean and across the mountains the way other men followed the harvests. A man could make a trade of anything, the camp said, even this. They said it low. They said he slept fine.

He had three men and a wagon and a stack of new pine boxes the length of a man and the length, too, of a child, and shorter ones, and one no longer than a loaf of bread, and Cora made herself not

count them. The crew worked clean. They opened a grave the way a careful man opens a watch, the sod set aside whole in squares to be laid back after, the dirt heaped on canvas so as not to scatter, and they went down with shovels and then with hands, and when they came to it they came to it gently, and Roy Hicks knelt at the lip and looked into the ground a long while before he let anybody touch what was there.

"Morning," he said to her, not looking up. He had a long flat face, sun-cured, a face that gave away exactly nothing, and a voice with no county she could place in it — a man who had followed this work across so many drowned valleys that the work had become his country. "You are the mapper. Frame's mapper. The one drew the plat I am working off of." He said it without weight, a fact among facts. "Good plat. Clean numbers. I have worked off worse."

"Thank you." She did not know what else a person said.

"Don't thank me." He reached into the grave and brought up, on his open palm, a thing that Cora took for a stone until he turned it and it was the cup of a skull, brown as the dirt it had lain in, and he held it to the light and turned it slow and read it the way she read a contour. "Old man," he said. "See there." He did not show her so much as say it to the open air, to the morning, the way a man names his work to keep himself honest in it. "Sutures all knit up and gone smooth. Teeth wore to the gum, the few that's left. Bone gone light and chalky — you can feel a man's age in the weight of him, did you know that. The old ones come up light as a basket. This here is a man died old in his bed, eighty if a day, and the stone says —" he glanced at the slate marker leaned against the heaped dirt "— says seventy-one. Stone's wrong by ten year. They generally are."

Cora stood very still. "The stones are wrong?"

"The stones are always wrong." He said it kindly, almost, setting the skull into a fold of clean muslin in the small box with a tenderness that did not match a word he spoke. "Not lying, most of them. Just wrong. A widow misremembers a birth year forty years gone. A boy cuts what his daddy tells him and his daddy's grieving and can't hold a number. They cut the date they wished it was, half the time, or the date that made the loss sit easier. Stone is a

thing the living make for the living. It tells you what they wanted to say." He nodded down into the grave. "Him, though. Him I can read regardless. Bones don't wish. Bones don't grieve and they don't lie and they can't be talked into a thing. A bone is just a true account of a body. You give me a man's bones and I will tell you near enough how old he was and whether he worked hard and whether he starved as a child and which arm he favored, and I will tell you all of it without ever once looking at his stone, because his stone is somebody's hope and his bones are just the fact."

He looked up at her then, for the first time, and his flat unfeeling eyes went over her the way her own went over a section of ground, taking the measure, and she had the sudden terror that he could read her the way he read the skull — that she had a true account written somewhere in her own weight and bearing that no felt hat or man's trousers or Cincinnati voice could cut a kind date over.

"You all right?" he said. "You have gone the color of that bone."

"It is close work to watch," she said. "I am not used to it."

"Nobody is. That is why they pay a man to be." He set the lid on the small box. "I do not mind it. Somebody has got to carry these people up the mountain or the water carries them downstream, and downstream is worse, I have seen downstream. I would rather it was hands that did it careful." He said it without knowing he had said Junior Sealy's word back to her, *hands*, and Cora flinched as though the boy had walked up behind her.

She made herself ask it. She heard her own voice do the thing it did, go flat and even and United States Government, and she hated that it still worked, that she could stand at the edge of an open grave and sound like a woman asking after the weather. "And a young one," she said. "Could you tell a young one the same. From the bones alone."

"A young one is the easiest of all." Roy Hicks stood and brushed the dirt off his knees and looked at her plain. "An old man's skull is all grown shut, the seams gone smooth like I showed you. A young man's, the seams are still open — you can see every plate of it, separate, like a thing not finished. And the teeth." He tapped his own jaw. "A young man's teeth are all in and white and not a one wore down. Wisdom teeth just come or just coming. The

long bones still got the growing-lines in the ends, the places where they was still adding on. A boy that died at nineteen, say, twenty — I would not even have to study on it. I would know the second I lifted the skull out of the ground that I had a young man, and not the old one his stone claimed, and I would set down my shovel and send a man for the foreman, because that is a grave gone wrong, and a grave gone wrong is the county's business and not mine."

The morning had gone very far away. Cora was aware of the sun on the heaped dirt and the smell of the opened ground, which was the smell of all opened ground, cellar-cold and root-bitter, and of the crew's low talk, and of her own hands, which were not steady, which she had put behind her back so the man would not read them.

"How far ahead are you," she said. "Of the schedule. They told me at the camp you were running ahead."

"Ahead, and gaining." He said it with the only pride she had heard in him, the clean pride of a man good at a hard thing. "The plat helps — your plat. But I will tell you the truth, miss, I do not work the ridge off the paper much, once I am on it. The paper gets me to the cemetery. After that I work by eye. I have opened — I do not know. Hundreds. More valleys than I can name to you. And a graveyard tells me where its people are before ever I read a number. The old ground sinks, see. A grave settles as the box goes and the body goes, sinks a hand's-width, two, and grasses different over the loose dirt, and I can stand at the gate of a churchyard I never saw and walk straight to every soul in it, marked or not, stone or no stone, because the ground remembers where it was opened. The ground keeps a better record than any of them." He picked up his shovel. "Paper is just paper. I have had plats lie to me same as stones. But I have never once had the ground lie. You learn to trust the ground or you do not last in this work."

He went back to it then, the next grave, the squares of sod set by, and Cora stood a moment longer because to leave too quick would be its own kind of confession, and then she walked back down the hill to her truck with her steady ruined hands and got in and did not start it.

She had thought the plat would save her. She had bent over

the linen in the drafting room with her India ink and her finest pen and she had drawn the lie clean — the Tipton plot redrawn, the grave under the 1880 stone set down as *unmarked, stone illegible, relocate to common ground*, so that it would go up the mountain in an anonymous box with the rest of the no-names and be put in the common ground at Sawmill Ridge without a soul ever lifting the skull to the light and reading the seams of it. She had thought a clean record would route the dead the way a clean map routed the living. She had believed, God help her, that she could draw her way out of it the way she had drawn her way out of these mountains the first time.

But Roy Hicks did not work off the paper. Roy Hicks worked off the ground, and the ground did not lie, and the ground knew exactly where they had opened it on a wet night in July of 1921 and lowered a nineteen-year-old boy under an old man's name. The grass grew different over it. It had grown different for fifteen years. She had platted the cemetery herself; she had stood at that stone with the alidade and felt the slope of the settled earth under her own boots and not let herself name it. Roy Hicks would name it. Roy Hicks would walk to it before he ever unrolled her plat, and he would go down into it gentle as he went down into everything, and he would lift out a skull with every plate of it showing separate like a thing not finished, with the teeth all in and white and a young man's, and he would set down his shovel and send a man for the foreman, because that was a grave gone wrong, and her clean cold beautiful lie of a plat would be the very thing that proved she had known.

She sat in the truck with her hands in her lap and looked up the hill at the man kneeling at the open ground, reading bones the way she read distances, the only other person in the valley who told the truth for a living and felt nothing while he did it, and she understood that he was coming for her, gently, methodically, ahead of schedule and gaining, and that there was no number she could write that would turn him, because she had built her whole defense out of paper and Roy Hicks had spent his life learning that paper was the one thing in this world you could not trust.

She thought of the night classes in Cincinnati, the cold drafting

hall, the instructor who had walked the rows rapping his knuckle on the table beside any plat that strayed from true. *The map does not lie, Miss Tipton. The map is the one honest thing a man makes. The ground forgets and the memory cheats and the witness misremembers, but the map holds.* She had believed him. She had built a self on it, had carried it like Scripture out of the mountains, and only now, in a survey truck at the foot of a churchyard with a fresh blot of ink drying on a forged plat in her satchel, did she see it stood the world exactly backward. The map did not hold. She had made it lie with her own honest hand. It was the ground that held — the dumb settled grass-grown ground that had kept the true account of one wet July night for fifteen years and never once been talked out of it. The instructor had it wrong, and Roy Hicks, who could not have drawn a contour to save his life, had it right, and the difference between them was going to cost her everything.

The water was at the foot of Burnt Ridge. The man who read the dead was a week away, less. And the ground, which never lied, was waiting to give her up.

Chapter Seventeen —

The Register

Reverend Tom Buckles could no longer see to read, and so he had sent for the one person in the valley with a fair clean hand and a reason to be near the church, and the irony of it was so complete, so quietly and perfectly aimed, that Cora half believed for a moment that he had aimed it.

He had not. That was the thing she came to understand, sitting across the plank table from him in the cold sanctuary with the good light falling through the east windows onto the two books between them — that the old man aimed at nothing, that he had given up aiming long ago, and that this was precisely what made him impossible to get past.

“They are to move the building Thursday week,” he said. He sat with his big ruined hands flat on the closed cover of the older book, the way a man rests his hands on something living. “Float it down to Sawmill Ridge whole, on the logs, if the river behaves. I am told it can be done. I am told a great many things can be done now.” He turned his face toward the window, and she saw the milk had come up further in his eyes since she had seen him last on the ridge — they were pale all the way across now, the blue gone to weather. “I can make out light still. Light and dark and the shape of you against the glass. Enough to know it is morning. Not enough to read my own register, and a register that cannot be read might as well burn with the rest of the hollow.” He moved his hands on the cover. “I would have it copied over fresh before we go. New book, new ink, a hand that will last. I asked who in this valley still writes a fair line, and they said, well, there is the Tipton woman, the mapper, she letters clean as print.” His pale eyes came

around to her, unerring for all they could not see. "And here you are."

"Here I am," Cora said.

"You will do it for me." It was not quite a question. "It is not survey work. I cannot pay but in thanks. But it is the last record of this place, child — every soul born and married and buried in Cane Hollow since my father's father kept it, and if it is not carried up the mountain true then this valley drowns entire, the dead twice over. Paper outlasts ground." He smiled, and it was a terrible gentle smile. "Even ground that is about to be a lake."

She should have refused. She had refused harder things. But she could not find, in the cold bright room with the old blind man's hope laid flat under his hands, the United States Government voice that refused things, and so she heard herself say yes, and Tom Buckles nodded as if he had never doubted it, and pushed the older book across the planks to her, and said, "Begin at the beginning. Read it to me as you copy. I like to hear it. My eyes are gone but the names are all still in here," and he touched his white head, "every one, and I do like to hear them said."

So she began at the beginning.

The register was a fearsome thing once she opened it — a hundred years and more of the hollow in faded iron-gall ink gone brown as old blood, the hands changing down the years as one preacher died and the next took up the pen, the spelling wandering, the dead crowding the living three and four to a page. She copied it line by line into the new book in her small upright hand, the cleanest lettering she owned, and she read each line aloud as she set it down, and across the table the old man listened with his eyes shut and his lips moving, and now and again when she read a name he would lift one finger off the cover and say a thing she had not asked for. *Sealy. That would be old Hampton Sealy, the rodman boy's great-grandsire, drove a wagon to Jonesborough and back in a day, they said, which was a lie, but a good one. And, Renfro. The first wife. She died of the milk-sick the same fall as my own first wife. We buried them a week apart and I preached them both and I do not believe I was any comfort to a soul, myself least of all.* The names came up out of the brown ink and the old man gave each one its

breath and Cora wrote them into the future the dam was leaving them, hour after hour, and the light moved across the floor.

She knew where it was. She had known from the moment she said yes. She had counted the pages against the years the whole way through, dreading it, doing the arithmetic of the dead, and a little after the light had gone off the floor and up the far wall she came to the year, and there it was in a hand browner than the rest, a hand she did not know, a preacher dead before her own birth, and her pen stopped over the new clean page.

Asa Tipton, the old register said. *Infant son of* — the names of her own grandparents, faded near to nothing. *Born and died in this year of our Lord 1880. Buried Burnt Ridge.*

One line. The true line. The infant uncle who had never had a stone until a wet July night in 1921 when her father needed an old name to cover a new grave and went up the ridge with a chisel and gave a long-dead baby a marker forty years late so that a drowned boy could lie under it and disappear. The register did not know about the second body. The register, kept honest by a man dead before the lie was made, said only the one true thing: that an infant named Asa Tipton had died in 1880 and been buried on the ridge. It said nothing of 1921. It could not. No one had written the second burial into it, because the second burial had never happened, officially; Asa Greer had simply run off, the valley said, gone down the river and never come back, and the register had no line for a boy who ran off.

This was the document she could not forge. She saw it whole, sitting there with the pen stopped over the page. She had redrawn the plat and the plat was a thing she had made; she could unmake it, remake it, no one the wiser, because the plat was only her own hand against her own hand. But the register was not hers. To copy it false — to add a line, to drop one, to write into the new book some convenient death that would muddy the count of bodies on the ridge — was to do it under the eyes of the man who held the whole hollow in his white head, every name, every year, in an order she could not see and could not predict, and who had asked her to read each line aloud precisely, she understood now with a cold that went past the cold of the room, so that he could hear it.

She read the line aloud. There was nothing else she could do. "Asa Tipton," she said. "Infant son. Born and died, 1880. Buried Burnt Ridge."

And the old man's finger came up off the cover.

"Ah," said Tom Buckles. He said it softly, and he did not open his eyes, and for a long moment he said nothing more, and Cora sat with the pen over the page and her heart going so hard she thought he must hear that too. "The little one," he said at last. "Eighteen and eighty. Your daddy's baby brother, that would be. Verlie's husband's brother." He was quiet again. "There is a thing about that grave, child."

The room was very still. The good light had climbed to the topmost pane and gone thin and gold.

"I am an old man," Tom Buckles said, "and near blind, and I have buried this whole valley with my own hands, and there is a thing about that grave I have carried longer than you have been grown, and I find I do not want to carry it up the mountain with the rest. A man wants to set a few things down before he goes to a new place. You will let me set this one down."

"Reverend —"

"Hush, now. Let me." He turned his pale ruined eyes on her, and though she knew he could not see her face she felt seen the way she had never been seen in her life, seen clear through the felt hat and the man's trousers and the Cincinnati voice and the steady ruined hands, seen down to the true account of her that no kind date could cover. "I cannot read my register anymore," he said. "But I knew it by heart before my eyes ever failed me, and I will tell you what I know. That stone up on Burnt Ridge that says Asa Tipton, eighteen-eighty — I never cut it. I never blessed it. It went up in the night, the summer of nineteen and twenty-one, the same summer the Greer boy went into the river and never came up. I was not asked to bury the Greer boy. There was no burial to bury him in. He ran off, they said. Down the river. And the next time I went up to that churchyard to lay somebody else away, there was a new stone over an old name, and the ground beside it fresh-settled, and I am a country preacher, child, but I am not a fool. I can count to one body. And I knew. I have known for fifteen years whose bones

are under your uncle's name."

Cora could not speak. The pen had bled a blot onto the clean new page and she did not move to lift it.

"I never said." The old man's voice was very gentle and very tired. "Not to the county. Not to Ila Greer, God forgive me, who has come to this rail every Sunday for fifteen years carrying on that her boy was by the water, and was right, and was let to seem mad for being right. Not to your father, who never once looked me in the eye after that summer and does not know to this day that he never fooled me. Not to a living soul. I have stood at that grave a hundred times and read the false name on the stone and said nothing, and I have asked the Lord more nights than I can tell you whether my silence was a mercy or a sin, and I have never gotten a clear answer, and I am too old now to wait on one." He drew a long breath. "I judged it a mercy. Three of you went up that ridge in the dark — your daddy, your brother, and a little girl that came back from that summer with a scar over her eye she has told everyone was a fall." His pale eyes did not waver from her face. "I judged that whatever happened at the water, it was already paid for, and paid hard, and that to dig it up would only drown the living to no purpose. So I kept it. A preacher is the keeper of his register, child, but he is the keeper of more than the register. He keeps what the valley cannot carry. That is the whole of the office, when you come down to it. The rest is just hymns."

The light had left the window. The sanctuary had gone gray and close and the two books lay between them, the old true one and the new one with her clean lettering and the one ugly blot, and the names of all the hollow's dead waited in the dark to be carried up the mountain in her hand.

"And now they are going to dig," Tom Buckles said. "The water has made the whole question over. What I could keep, the dam cannot. They will open that ground whether I bless it or no. And so I find I must give it to somebody, child, this thing I have kept, because I cannot keep it under water and I cannot keep it past my own death, which is nearer than the gates closing. I have prayed on who to give it to." He folded his ruined hands. "And the Lord, in His humor, sent me a Tipton with a fair clean hand to copy my

book.”

Cora found her voice from a long way down. “Why are you telling me.”

“Because you are about to do something with my register,” the old man said, simple as that, “and I wanted you to know, before you did it, that there is one record in this valley you cannot fix and one memory you cannot edit, and that both of them already know, and have known a long time, and have chosen mercy. I am not asking you to confess to me. I have no use for your confession; I have had the truth fifteen years and it has not saved one soul, least of all me. I am telling you that you are seen, and have always been seen, and were forgiven before you ever came back up that road in your government truck. The valley made up its mind about you children long ago, child, the way it made up its mind to let Ila say her true mad thing. It chose not to look. Sometimes that is the only grace a poor place has got to give — to know a thing, and choose not to look at it, and let the people that did it go on and live.” He pushed the new book gently toward her across the planks, past the blot, past her stopped hand. “Now. Write it true. Write the little one in, 1880, the way it stands, because that is what happened in this book and a true book is the last thing I will give this place. What is under the stone is between you and the ground and the men with the shovels, and that is coming whether we will it or no. But the register goes up the mountain honest. Will you do that for me.”

And Cora Tipton, who had built her whole life out of being the kind of person who could hold a thing still and read it true while the world she was reading came apart, bent her head over the new book in the last of the light and wrote, in her small upright hand, the one true line — *Asa Tipton, infant son, born and died 1880, buried Burnt Ridge* — and her hand, for the first time at that grave’s name, did not tremble at all, because there was nothing left to hold it still against; she had been seen, and the worst had not come, and the old man across the table sat with his blind eyes shut and his lips moving, saying the names she read him into the dark, keeping what the valley could not carry, and outside the church the water came up another quiet inch toward the doors.

Chapter Eighteen — Absalom Stands

Absalom Tipton woke before the light, as he had every day of his sixty-one years, and lay a while in the cold listening to the house. A house tells a man things in the dark if he has lived in it long enough. He knew the pop of the ridgepole taking the night's frost, the settle of the chimney stone, the dry whisper of the laurel against the north wall when the wind came down off the bald. He knew which board by the bed would speak under a foot and which would hold its peace, and he had learned, in the three years since Verlie died, to step on the one that held its peace, out of a habit of not waking a woman who was no longer there to wake.

He worked his right hand under the quilt before he rose. He did it every morning, the way another man might say a prayer. He curled the fingers, or asked them to, and felt them come halfway and stop, the old knot of bone in the knuckles refusing the rest the same as it had refused for fifteen years, and then he opened them and lay still and was, for that moment, entirely himself. A man with a hand that would not close. He had told the few who asked that he broke it on a green oak maul handle splitting rails in a wet spring, and they had believed him, because it was the kind of thing a hand broke on, and because no man in the hollow had cause to think Absalom Tipton would tell him different.

The lie sat easy. That was the thing nobody warned you of about a lie kept long enough — it did not gnaw. It became a fence post you tied the gate to, and after a while you saw only the gate swinging true on it, and forgot the post was ever set by your own hand.

He got up and dressed in the dark and built the fire and stood

over it while it caught, holding the bad hand to the heat because the heat helped it, somewhat. Outside the one window the ridge was coming gray. Down where the bottom land lay there was a paleness now that had not been there in the spring, a flat shine among the trees like a field flooded for rice, and he made himself look at it, the way a man makes himself look at a wound to learn its size. The water. It had come up over Dewey's lower corn ground in August and over the Sealy slough and was climbing the hollow a hand's width at a time, patient as grief. The government men had a number for how high it would come and a date for the rest, and the number put it well up the side of Burnt Ridge, and the date was the first of December, and both were as fixed in their minds as Scripture in his, and neither, he had come to understand, would bend for any man.

Let it come, then. He warmed his hand and watched the water and was not afraid of it, which surprised him. He had buried a wife in this ground and a brother he could not remember and a thing he could remember too well, and a man who has put that much of himself under one hill does not fear the hill taken under water. He fears it taken open. There is a difference, and the difference was the whole of what was left to him.

* * *

Verlie had loved the spring on this ridge better than any season. She would stand at this window of a morning in May and watch the redbud come on down the hollow, that smoke of pink it made along the creek before the green caught it up, and she would sing under her breath, not even knowing she was doing it, some old long-meter tune her mother had carried over the mountains — *the water is wide, I cannot get o'er* — and Absalom would stand behind her and not say anything for fear of stopping the singing. She knew the words to ballads about drownings that had happened in Scotland four hundred years before either of them was thought of, girls put under the millpond by faithless men, and she sang them sweet as a hymn while she pieced a quilt, and it had never struck Absalom as anything but pretty until the summer it stopped being pretty.

He had married her in the spring of nineteen-and-three, a hard young man of twenty-eight who knew the worth of nothing he could

not weigh in his hand, and she had spent thirty years teaching him, against his nature, the way water teaches stone — so slowly he never felt himself wearing, and only knew it was done when he found, after she was gone, that he was a different shape than before.

It was Verlie who had named the second baby Asa, after his own dead infant brother, when the doctor said it would not live the night. It lived eleven days. They buried it by the first Asa's unmarked place, and Verlie would not let him cut a stone, said she could not bear to read it, and so there were two Tipton boys named Asa in that ground with no stone between them — one dead in eighteen-and-eighty before Absalom could walk, one dead in nineteen-and-six before it could open its eyes good — and Verlie had carried both of them the rest of her days the way she carried her songs, down under the place where talk could reach.

He had thought of all this — he would swear before God he had thought of all this in the space of a breath — on the July night fifteen years gone when he stood on the creek bank with the boy dead in the shallows and his son white and shaking on the rocks and his daughter, his Verlie's-girl, crouched in the willows with her dress torn and a stone still in her fist and her eyes gone somewhere a fourteen-year-old's eyes should never have to go. He had stood there with his right hand swelling and the river going by in the dark, loud with the rain that had fallen up on the bald, and he had thought: there is a stone already cut for an Asa in this ground, and no one alive knows it is empty of any man, and Verlie has grieved that name twice and will grieve it a third time before she will see her children answer to the law for what was done here tonight.

He had marked it ever since, the way a surveyor drives a corner. Everything that came after — the lie, the burial under the borrowed name, the fifteen years — ran out from that one breath on the bank, and he had never once been able to decide, lying awake, whether what moved in him was love or fear wearing love's coat, and he had come to suspect it was both, twined too close to part, the way a man's two hands are both his own.

* * *

He took his rifle down after he had eaten — not because he meant to use it but because a man who is going to stand ought to

look like one — and walked up through the laurel to the cemetery in the new light to see how close the water had come.

The graves lay on the south shoulder of Burnt Ridge where the morning sun warmed them first, the way the dead ought to be laid, his grandfather had said, so they could feel the day come. Tipton plot and Greer plot and churchyard all together under the big white oak, the oak going bare now, its leaves down brown over the mounds, and the new survey stakes standing among the stones with their red bands like a circus come to a funeral. He had pulled three of them up in October and the government had driven them again, and he had let them stand after that — not from any softening but because pulling stakes was a child's resistance, and what he was about was a man's.

Verlie's grave was near the oak. He had cut her stone himself, badly, the lettering crowded at the end where he ran out of room the way he had always run out of room, *Verlie Tipton, 1879-1933, At Rest*, and below it, because the carving had broken something open in him, he had cut the only line of her drowning ballads he could ever hold in his head: *the water is wide*. People took it for sorrow over a long life. It was not. It was a man telling his wife, in the only voice he had left, that he knew now what she had always known — that there was no getting over, that the wide water was simply the truth of the world and the songs had only ever been trying to say so.

He stood at her grave a while. Then he made himself walk to the other stone, the one cut clean and old, *Asa Tipton, 1880*, the stone Verlie had set in the autumn of 'twenty-one for a reason the valley believed and a reason it did not know. The mound under it had long since gone flat and grassed over; you could not have told it from a grave fifty years quiet. That was the thing Absalom held to in the worst of the nights — that the ground keeps no record. The ground does not know whose bones it holds. It had taken the boy in without a question the way it had taken Verlie and the infants and the first Asa, made no distinction between the loved and the unloved, the man who fell and the man who was struck, and given them all the same dark and the same patience, and a man could almost find God in that, in the great mercy of the ground's not

knowing.

But the water did not keep that mercy. That was what he had finally understood, standing here counting how high the pale shine had climbed since yesterday. The water would not leave the dead in the ground's keeping. It would send men with shovels to lift them into the daylight one box at a time and read them and number them and ask of each the question the ground had never asked. *Who is this. How did he die. Whose hand.* And there was one box on this ridge that could not bear the asking.

He had thought, in the fall, that he might get ahead of it — come up one night with a mattock and do alone what he could not let the government do, open the borrowed grave and carry what was in it up the mountain to some hole no map would find, and let them drown an empty grave. He had got as far as carrying the mattock up the ridge one November night before the wrong of it turned him back. Not the labor; he was old but not weak. It was that he had stood over the flat mound and understood that to dig the boy up himself would be to call him, after fifteen years, by the name that was his — to undo the one mercy Verlie had made, the grieving-in of the stranger boy under the boy she had grieved already. He could not do that to her even now. *Let it stand*, she had said at the last, when she could barely say anything. *Let the both of them sleep under the one stone. The Lord knows the count.* And he had promised, and now the water was coming to make a liar of them both.

* * *

His daughter had come up to the house twice since she got back, with her boxed transit and her field clothes and her mother's exact way of going still when she was holding something down, and both times he had given her stone for stone and watched from the window as she walked back down the ridge, wanting, with a wanting that frightened him, to call after her. He never had. He did not have the words; or he had them and could not make his mouth do the work, the same as his hand could not do its — some break in him that had set wrong fifteen years gone and would not close the rest of the way.

She thought he had not forgiven her. He had seen that in her

the second time, the way she braced for him to lay it at her feet — the stone, the bank, the silence — as if she believed, his fourteen-year-old in the willows, that the weight of that night was hers to carry. It had near to broke him not to be able to say the one true thing: that there was no forgiving to be done, that a child set on by a drunk man and reaching for the only stone in reach was a thing the Lord Himself would not hold against her, that her stone had no more killed Asa Greer than the rain that swelled the ford had killed him, that they had all of them only been the river's instruments that night — and that the only sin a man might rightly hang on a soul was the one Absalom had taken up after, alone, on purpose, with his eyes open.

For he had let Dewey believe. That was the post the whole gate hung on. In the days after, when Dewey could not eat or sleep and finally said it out to his father in the barn, gray-faced, *I killed him, Daddy, I put him down and he did not get up* — Absalom had looked at his son, twenty years old and shaking, and had it in his mouth to say *no, son, it was my hand, look at it*, and had let the words die behind his teeth. Because he had seen, in that breath, the whole of how it would go: that if he took it, the law might take him, and the family would go down with a hanged man's name, and Verlie would bury a husband on top of everything else; but if Dewey carried it as an accident, a fight in the dark nobody could parse — the thing it half was — then Dewey would suffer it the rest of his life, yes, but Dewey would be free in the eyes of the law, and Dewey was young, and the young heal what the old cannot, and the family would stand.

He had called it mercy for fifteen years, lying awake. Only now, with the water at the foot of the ridge and the box about to be opened, did he turn the word over and look at the other side of it, where it said, in letters cut as clean as any stone, *coward*. For a brave man would have spoken — would have stood up in the daylight and said *it was my hand, let the law do what it will*, and freed his son not by handing him the weight but by telling him plain there was no weight, that the river did it, that no one of them alone had done it. Absalom had not trusted the truth that far. He had reckoned a lie a stronger roof, and had spent fifteen years

finding out it was — and finding out, too, what it cost to live under a roof you knew was a lie, the way the knowing got into everything: into his hand, into his marriage at the end, into the gone-still place between him and both his living children.

Love or fear. Mercy or cowardice. He stood among the stones with the cold coming up through his boots and could not separate them, and was old enough now to doubt they could be — that maybe every mercy a frightened man performs has the fear sewn through it like the warp through a quilt, and you cannot pick the one thread without the whole coming to pieces in your hands.

What he could do, still, was stand. A man who could not say the truth could at least refuse to let it be dug up by strangers and read out and weighed in a Hawkin County courtroom with reporters there and Ila Greer there. He could refuse to sell. He could keep his name off their paper. He could stay on the ridge when the marshals came, and stay through the water too, could let the slackwater rise over the empty house and the full graves and the borrowed stone and himself with them, and take the whole of it down into the dark together — the loved and the unloved, the true name and the borrowed one — the way the merciful ground would have taken them if the government had let the ground alone.

That was a thing worth drowning for. Or he had told himself so for so long he could no longer tell it from one, which by now amounted to the same.

He turned his bad hand to the morning sun, opened it as far as it would open, which was halfway, and held it there in the cold light over the flat mound with no name that was its own. Below him the pale water lay among the trees, higher than yesterday. It would be higher tomorrow. He stood among his dead and his lies, which were by now the same family, and set himself like a corner stake against everything coming up the hollow to lift them into the light.

Chapter Nineteen — The Crew Comes Early

Cora knew something had gone wrong the moment she turned off the camp road and saw the truck already at the foot of Burnt Ridge.

It was Roy Hicks's truck, the flatbed with the come-along and the stacked pine boxes and the canvas, and it had no business being there. Not for nine more days. She had built those nine days the way she built everything, carefully, in ink, a schedule of removals she had drawn up herself and laid before Wendell Frame and watched him initial, and she had built into it, where no one would think to look, a small dishonest slack — the Tipton plot scheduled last of all the plots on the ridge, dead last, the twenty-ninth and final grave, so that whatever happened would happen at the end, in December, in the rush, when there might be no time left for anyone to stand over an opened box and ask questions. She had told herself it was only good order, sequencing the work logically from the churchyard outward. She had known exactly what it was.

She had thought she had time. That was the whole of her error, and she saw it now with the cold clean horror of a draftsman who finds, too late, that he has trusted a bearing he never checked. She had spent two weeks moving paper around to buy herself December, and the river and the courthouse and Wendell Frame's decency had each been moving too, faster than her paper, on bearings of their own, and the three of them had converged on this one morning the way three sight-lines converge on a single fixed point. There was a word for that in her trade. A triangulation. You could not hide a thing that three independent lines all pointed at. The ridge had been triangulated, and she had drawn one of the lines herself.

And now the truck was here, and men were on the ridge already

with the morning barely up, and Junior, beside her, sat forward and said, "That ain't right. We are doing the Howells today. The Howells is the other end."

"Stay in the truck," Cora said, and was out of it before it had fully stopped.

She found Wendell Frame at the foot of the path with a clipboard and his good overcoat and the particular brisk apology he wore when he had decided something over her head and meant to be decent about it. He started talking before she reached him.

"Cora. Now, I know. I know what the schedule said." He held up a hand, placating. "Knoxville moved on us. The Greer matter went to the county Tuesday — the woman still won't consent, you know that, Ila Greer — and the county's attorney filed to have the whole ridge condemned and ordered open by the court, the entire Burnt Ridge tract, all of it at once, on a date certain. If that order comes down, we lose all say in how it's done. They'll send their own people and a process server and it will be in the Knoxville paper and it will be ugly, and frankly it will be slow, and we do not have slow. So I made the call. We open the ridge now, on our terms, our crew, quiet, and we get the dead up and boxed and to Sawmill Ridge before any judge can put his name to anything. It's better this way. For the families. For everybody." He looked at her, wanting her to see it. "Roy's working straight through. He's good. He's fast and he's respectful, you've seen him."

"In what order," Cora said.

"What?"

"What order is he opening them in." She heard her own voice come out level and far away, the United States Government voice, the voice that had carried her through, and she clung to it now like a rail on a falling stair. "There's a sequence, Wendell. There's a plat. The grave numbers —"

"Oh, he's not working the numbers." Wendell waved at the ridge, easy, fatal. "No time to fuss the numbers with this on us. He's working the ground. Started at the oak — the old Tipton corner, the oldest stones, said the oldest go first because they're the least likely to have anybody object, the families long gone." He smiled, pleased with the logic of it, his and Roy's both. "Most of

those Tipton graves up by the oak are from the last century. No kin to fuss. Sensible place to start.”

The oldest stones. By the oak. *Asa Tipton, 1880.*

Cora went up the path.

She did not run, because some last cold managing part of her knew that a woman running up a cemetery path would be a thing remembered afterward, a thing that would want explaining, and so she walked, fast, the field book clutched to her chest, up through the laurel and out under the bare oak into the cold flat light where the stones stood among the red-banded stakes, and she heard the work before she saw it — the bite and lift of two long-handled spades, the dull conversation of men at labor, and under it a sound she would carry the rest of her life, the particular hollow knock of a spade striking old wood.

They had the grave most of the way open. The stone, *Asa Tipton, 1880*, had been laid back flat on the grass with a care that struck her even then, even in her terror — Roy Hicks did not throw stones, he laid them down like sleeping children. Two of his men stood waist-deep in the cut, and Roy himself knelt at the lip of it with his sleeves rolled and his forearms dark to the elbow, and he was leaning down into the grave doing something gentle with his hands among the broken boards and the dirt, and he did not look up when her shadow came across him.

“Morning, Miss Tipton,” Roy said, to the grave. “We are ahead of your book, I expect you have heard. Mr. Frame’s orders.” His voice was the voice of a man who had done this a thousand times and meant no harm by any of it and never would. “I will say this is a strange one, though. You are the one drew the plat. Maybe you can tell me what I am looking at, because I have opened a deal of graves and I have not opened one like this.”

“What do you mean,” Cora said. The words came out of a dry mouth.

Roy sat back on his heels. He pushed his hat up with the back of a dirty wrist, and he looked at her, and there was no suspicion in it yet, only the honest puzzlement of a craftsman who has found a board that will not square. “Stone says ‘eighteen and eighty.’” He nodded at the slab on the grass. “Says an infant, the way I read

it, or anyhow somebody put down before there was much call to write the why of it. Old grave. But this here —” he gestured down into the cut, almost apologetic, “— this is no infant, and this is no fifty-six years in the ground. This box is pine and the pine ain’t but middling rotted. And the man in it —” he said *man* and Cora’s heart went sideways, “— the man in it is grown, or near it. Young, by the teeth. I’d put him nineteen, twenty. I can tell a young man’s skull from an old man’s same as you can tell a green board from a seasoned one, it is a thing the hands learn.” He paused. He had not yet arrived where she had already arrived; he was only walking toward it, steady, the way he did everything. “And there is this.” He brought his hand up out of the grave.

He held it out to her across the open cut, and opened his dirt-black fingers, and in the cup of his palm, furred with grave dirt, smaller than she remembered it and larger than she could bear, was the locket.

The brass had gone dark, near to black, but it was the locket. Her locket. The little hinged brass heart her mother had given her one Christmas with a chip of looking-glass behind the front pane, the locket she had worn through her twelfth year and her thirteenth and into her fourteenth and had given, finally, on a green evening at the ford with her heart going like a bird in her two hands, to Asa Greer, because she had had nothing else to give and had wanted him to have something of hers against him going off to whatever Dewey said they were going off to, and Asa had laughed and put it round his neck under his shirt and said he would wear it where his heart was, and that was the last truly sweet thing that had ever passed between them, a week, less than a week, before the night at the ford.

“It was on him,” Roy said. “Round his neck. Chain’s all but gone but it was at the throat, see, where a man wears a thing. Somebody buried him in it.” He turned it a little in the light, and the hinge, stiff with fifteen years and the wet of the ground, gave under his thumb, and the little heart fell open in his palm, and Cora knew what was scratched inside before she saw it because she had scratched it there herself with a sewing needle at twelve years old, lying on her stomach on the puncheon floor by the fire while her

mother sang, two letters, crooked, a child's work, her own initials, the small proud claim a child makes on a small bright thing: *C.T.*

Roy looked at the letters. Then he looked up at her, and she watched it arrive in him at last, the whole of it, watched the craftsman's puzzlement go out of his face and something slower and worse come up behind it, because Roy Hicks could not read a register but he could read a stone and he could read a skull and now he could read two letters scratched by a child's hand, and her name was Cora Tipton, and the stone said Tipton, and the man in the ground was nineteen and not an infant and fifty-six years too young to be the one the stone called him, and there was a thing round his neck with her own initials in it.

"C.T.," Roy said, very quiet. He was not a quick man but he was not a fool, and he had a daughter of his own. He closed the locket, gentle, and he did not hand it to her and he did not keep it; he held it a moment between them over the open grave like a thing neither of them had the right to. "This your stone, Miss Tipton?" he asked. "This your plot?"

Below them, far down the hollow, the pale water lay among the trees at the foot of the ridge, motionless, climbing, and the cold came down off the bald and moved the bare branches of the oak, and Cora stood at the lip of the grave she had spent fifteen years and half a continent and the whole architecture of her life keeping closed, and looked at the small dark heart with her name in it lying open in a stranger's hand in the daylight, and found she had no United States Government voice left, no level far-off voice, no column to set it in. She had only the truth, finally, surfaced like a thing too long held under, breaking water at last into the cold bright air.

"Put it down, Roy," she said. "Please. Just — put it down a minute. And get your men up out of there. Get them out of him."

Roy looked at her another long moment. Then he said, "Boys, come up," and the two men climbed up out of the cut wiping their hands on their trousers, glancing between Roy and the woman, knowing the way men know that something had changed and not yet what. Roy laid the locket down on the laid-back stone, on the worn-smooth letters that read *Asa Tipton, 1880*, and the brass

heart lay there small and open and certain, the truest survey marker ever set on Burnt Ridge, and he stood up off his knees with the slow care of a man rising in a church.

"I'll have to report it," he said. Not unkindly. The same as Vester Renfro, the same as all of them — not unkindly, which was the unbearable thing. "A grave that don't match its stone. A young man under an old name. I can't not, Miss Tipton. There's law on it. The county'll have to be told, and the coroner, likely, and —" he stopped, and she watched him not say *and the Greers*, watched him swallow it out of a mercy he could not afford to keep, "— and them as has a claim." He looked down the ridge to where Wendell stood small at the foot of the path with his clipboard, waiting, not yet knowing. "I am sorry," Roy said, and meant it, and that too she would carry.

Wendell had come up the path by then. She heard him before she saw him, the brisk decent climb of him, and then he was at her shoulder, out of breath, looking down into the cut and at the laid-back stone and at the two men standing off to the side with their hats in their hands, and she watched him try to read it and fail, because Wendell Frame read the world as a set of problems with solutions and there was no solution in front of him, only a grave that disagreed with its stone and the woman he had sent to close the parcel standing over it gone white as the frost.

"Cora," he said. "What is it. What's wrong with the grave." And then, when she did not answer, gentler, with the first edge of his own dread coming into it, "Whose is it?"

She could have told him then. She could have made it a thing of the United States Government, a clerical error, a misfiled stone, could have spent the column-voice she had left to buy a day. She looked at the locket open on the worn letters, *C.T.*, and she found she did not want to spend it. She found she was done spending it.

"It's mine to tell," she said. "Give me till tonight, Wendell. Not the county, not yet. Till tonight. There's people have to hear it from me before they hear it from a coroner." She looked at him. "You owe me that much, for sending one of our own up here to do it."

She watched the section chief war with the true believer war

with the man who was fond of her, and she watched the man win, narrowly, which she had not been sure he would. "Till tonight," Wendell said. "God help me. Till tonight, and then it's the law's." He looked down into the grave, and something passed over his bright practical face that she had not seen there before, something that might in another man have been the beginning of grief. "Roy. Cover him back over. Decent. Nobody touches him till she's back."

Then Cora stood among the opened ground and the laid-back stone and the boy she had loved and the small bright thing she had given him, and the fifteen years she had spent drawing the world to scale so she would never have to feel its true size came apart in her quiet as ice going off a pond in spring, all at once and without a sound, and the slackwater lay at the foot of the ridge being patient, being a lake, climbing toward the open grave a hand's width at a time, and for the first time since she was fourteen years old Cora Tipton was standing in the exact place the worst thing had happened and not measuring it. Only standing in it. Only there.

Chapter Twenty — The Locket

She found Dewey at the lower place loading the last of his life onto a borrowed truck.

She had walked there from the ridge — left the truck for Junior, left Wendell calling her name, left Roy Hicks to his telephoning down at the camp, and walked, the locket in her coat pocket where Roy had finally let her take it, *just till the county comes, then it's theirs, you understand*, her fingers around it the whole mile so that she came to her brother's dooryard with the brass warm from her hand for the first time in fifteen years. Ruth was in the house wrapping crockery in newspaper; Cora could see her through the window. The two older children, Lonnie and Pearl, were carrying a chair between them across the bare yard, and the baby, June, sat on a quilt in the cold sun banging a tin cup, and there was a whole family's worth of furniture out on the frozen ground waiting to go up the mountain, the bedstead and the safe and the churn and the dough box, the accumulated weight of a life that was about to be water.

Dewey was wrestling the cookstove up a plank ramp single-handed and losing, and he saw her coming and let it back down with a clang and stood breathing, and something in her face stopped whatever he had been going to say.

"They opened it," she said. "This morning. Ahead of the schedule. Roy Hicks opened the grave." She took the locket out of her pocket and held it out on her flat palm the way Roy had held it out to her, and she watched her brother look at it and not know it, and then know it, the color going out of him the way it had gone out of Roy. "It was on him, Dewey. Round his neck. I gave it to

him. The week before. They've got it now. They know it's not the eighteen-eighty grave. They know it's a young man with —" she made herself say it, here, to him, the first time in her life she had said any of it to a living soul, "— with his skull broke. Roy's telephoning the county."

Dewey sat down on the edge of the ramp. He sat down the way a man sits when his legs have quit, all at once, hard, and he put his face in his two big farmer's hands, and for a while he did not say anything, and out in the yard the baby banged the cup and Pearl said something to Lonnie about the chair and the ordinary terrible machinery of a family moving went on around the two of them like nothing.

"Then it's done," Dewey said into his hands. "It's done. It'll all come out now." He took his hands down. His eyes were dry and that was worse than weeping. "Cora, you have to listen to me, before they come. There's a thing I have carried fifteen years and I never told you nor anybody but Daddy and I have to tell it now while I can still get it said." He looked at her, and she saw the boy in him, the twenty-year-old, the way she must have looked to their father in the willows. "I killed him. Asa. I killed Asa Greer. I have let the whole world think it was a drowning and it was not. I came on him at the ford that night, with you, doing what he was doing, and I went blind, Cora, I went pure blind, and I beat him down on them rocks, I had my hands on him and I put him under, I do not even rightly know if I knew the water was there, and he did not come up. I done it. Me. And Daddy helped me cover it because he is my daddy, and I have lived every day of fifteen years a murderer that never paid, and the onliest peace I ever found was signing that paper to leave this ground because I could not stand on it another year. That's why I signed first. That's why. So when they come, you tell them it was me. You tell them the truth. Let it be me. I am tired, Cora. I am so tired of it being me in the dark."

And Cora, who had walked a mile holding the warm brass with the whole of her own fifteen-year lie ready to be laid down at last, heard her brother lay down his, and understood, standing in the cold yard, that they had been carrying the same coffin from opposite ends and had never once, in fifteen years, turned around to see who

was at the other end of it.

"No," she said. "Dewey. No. Listen to me now." She came and sat down beside him on the ramp, close, the way they had not sat since they were children, and she put the locket in his hand and closed his fingers over it. "I was there. On the bank. You came after, but I was there before you. He had me down in the willows, Dewey. He was — he was hurting me. He had hold of me and I could not get loose and he had been ugly and he was drunk and I was fourteen and I got my hand on a creek rock, a creek rock about so big, and I hit him. At the side of the head, here." She touched her own temple, where under the hair, where no one knew. "Hard as I could. To make him let go. And he let go and he staggered and went down on one knee in the shallows holding his head, and that is when you came. That is when you came on us and saw me with my dress tore and thought —" her voice caught and she made it go on, "— thought what any brother would think, and went for him. I dazed him, Dewey. I struck him first. He was already hurt and already down when you got to him. So if it was your fists put him under, then it was my rock that — my rock that —" She could not finish it. She had carried that exact sentence unfinished for fifteen years; it had no end she had ever been able to write.

Dewey was staring at her. "You never said. All this time, you never —"

"Daddy told me not to. After. He said say nothing about Asa hurting me, say nothing about the rock, it is a drowning and that is all it is, and you are a child and no one will ask a child, and I was a child, and I did what he said, and then I left, and I have spent every year since certain — *certain*, Dewey — that it was me. That my rock started it. That I killed him and you and Daddy only finished what a fourteen-year-old girl began." She was crying now, finally, the cold tracking down her face, fifteen years of it. "And you have spent every year certain it was you. And we have neither one of us ever said a word to the other, we have just — we have just carried it, separate, this whole time, in the same family, eating at the same —"

"Stop," Dewey said. But not harsh. He had hold of her arm. "Stop a minute." He was working it through, slow, the way their

father worked things through, and she watched him try to fit her version against his own and find that they did not cancel, that they did not even fit, that they were two different nights laid over the same dark hour. "If you struck him first — if he was down when I —" He shook his head, hard, like a man with water in his ears. "No. No, Cora, you don't know what you saw. You were a chap and it was black dark and you were hurt, you'd been — you couldn't have seen straight, you couldn't have. I know what I done. I had my two hands on him. I felt him quit under my hands. A man knows that. A man carries that and he don't get it wrong."

"And I know what I done," she said. "I felt the rock go home, Dewey. I felt it in my arm clear up to the shoulder. I have felt it every day for fifteen years. You think you are the only one allowed to be sure?" She heard her own voice climb and did not stop it. "That is the thing of it. That is the very thing. We are both of us sure. We are both of us dead certain, fifteen years certain, and we cannot both be right, and we have spent the whole of our lives not knowing because not one time did we ask the other what they saw. You went off into your part of that night and I went off into mine and we shut the doors and we have been alone in there ever since, the both of us, in the same house, eating off the same table —"

"Then which of us —" Dewey stopped. "Then which of us done it."

And there it was, the question that had no floor under it, the question Roy Hicks had set down on the stone in two scratched letters: *whose hand*. The child's account and the grown man's account collided in the cold yard and neither one held, and into the gap between them came, for the first time, the terrible spacious possibility that the answer was not in either of their hands at all, that the rain had swelled the ford and the dark had been total and the river had been the river, and that all three of them — for it was three, she understood now, with a lurch, *three*, her rock and Dewey's fists and somewhere in it their father, his hand, the hand that never closed, she had not known about the hand until this exact moment of saying it all out and now she saw it, *the hand* — that all three of them had each gone away believing themselves the sole and secret murderer of one boy, when no one of them could

possibly say, when the truth was a thing the slackwater had been keeping all along and was only now, ahead of schedule, giving back.

"Daddy's hand," Cora said slowly. "Dewey. His right hand. The one that won't close."

Dewey went still.

"He always said it was the maul handle," she said. "Splitting rails."

Her brother looked at her, and looked at the dark brass heart in his open palm, and looked out across the frozen yard where his children were carrying the last of the chairs, and he did not answer, because there was no answer to give yet, because the thing was too new and too old at once, fifteen years surfacing all in one cold morning like a drowned field coming back up out of a drained pond, every fence and furrow of it suddenly there again and not one of them where you remembered. He closed his hand over the locket. He opened it. He closed it.

"He took it off me," Dewey said, low, as if to himself. "In the barn. After. I said to him I done it, I said it plain, and he never told me no. He had his hand wrapped up in a rag and he never once said *son, look here, look at my hand, it was me*. He let me say it. He stood there and let me take it up and he —" Dewey's voice went, then came back rough. "Fifteen year I have stood on that ground a killer and he could have lifted it off me with three words and he never said them. His own boy." He turned his head away, toward the children, and Cora saw the muscle work in his jaw, saw him try the shape of it — that what he had carried as his solitary crime had been, all along, a thing his father held and weighed and chose, every day, to let him keep carrying. "Why would a man do that. Why would a daddy do that to his boy?"

"I don't know," Cora said, though she was beginning, faintly, in the cold, to think she did — to think it had a name, and that the name was the same one cut over their mother's grave, *the water is wide*, the same hard helpless love that builds a roof out of a lie because it cannot build one out of the truth. But she did not say it. It was not hers to say. It was their father's, up on the ridge, with his rifle and his hand that would not close, and the saying of it would have to be his.

"We have to go up to the house," he said at last, hoarse. "Before the county comes. Up to Daddy."

"I know," Cora said. And then, because it had to be said once, plainly, before they carried it up the ridge to the old man: "Dewey. Whatever he tells us up there. Whatever his hand done or never done. You did not kill Asa Greer. Not by yourself. I did not either. Hear me. We were children that the worst thing in the world happened to, and we have grown up into two people who decided, each one alone in the dark, to be the guilty one, because being guilty was easier to stand than the other thing." Her voice shook. "The other thing being that it just happened. That a drunk boy and a swole-up ford and three scared people in the rain made a death between them and no one hand in it can be pulled out and hung up and blamed. We wanted it to be us. Both of us. We wanted it so bad we never even asked. Isn't that a thing." She wiped her face with the heel of her hand, the ink still under the nails. "Isn't that just the saddest thing you ever heard."

Dewey did not answer. But after a moment he took her hand, the drafting hand, in his big rough farmer's one, and held it, and that was answer enough for the cold yard and the loaded truck and the fifteen years.

But neither of them rose, not yet. They sat on the ramp in the cold sun a while longer with the locket between them and fifteen years of silence breaking around them slow and soundless as ice off a pond, and out past the bare trees at the bottom of the hollow the water lay still and pale and patient, neither flowing nor flooding, climbing toward all of them a hand's width at a time, and Cora held to her brother's arm and her brother held to the small bright thing she had given a dead boy at the ford, and for the moment that was all either of them could do, which was more, far more, than they had done in fifteen years, which was simply to sit at the same end of the same weight, at last, together, and not let go.

Chapter Twenty-One — Who Struck

Absalom Tipton had not slept in the house since they opened the grave.

He slept, when he slept at all, in the corn crib above the spring, on a pallet of feed sacks with his coat for a quilt, because the house had Verlie in it — not her body, that was in the ground on the ridge with her own number painted on a lath beside it now, but the whole shape of her, the chair she had carved a hollow into, the cold loom in the corner, the place on the doorsill her hand had worn to a shine — and he could not lie under that roof and keep his peace with what was loose in the valley. Down in the crib there was only corn, and mice, and through the chinking the sound of the river that was no longer a river. He could hear it being a lake all night. It used to talk. Now it only listened.

The crew had come up the ridge four days back, ahead of every promise, ahead of the daughter's careful paper, and set their bars to the stone that read *Asa Tipton, 1880*, and Absalom had stood in the laurel and watched and not stopped them, because there was no stopping it, because he had known for fifteen years the day would come when the ground gave the boy back. He had watched Roy Hicks lift a long thing out of the dark and hold it to the light and go still. He had seen, even with his old eyes, that the skull in the contractor's hands was not the skull of a baby, and he had turned and walked down off the ridge and not been back up it since.

Now it was the fourth night, the moon down, and his son was standing in the door of the crib.

Absalom knew him by his breathing before he knew him by the dark. Dewey breathed like a man who had run, even standing still,

two days into being a man with nothing left to run from.

"They have got the county sheriff at Renfro's," Dewey said. "And a man from the dam in a necktie. And Hawkin County wants somebody to account for whose bones those are." His voice came out of the dark flat and worn through. "Cora is down there now. Trying to take it all on herself. The forging, the plat, all of it. Like she was the one. Like a girl drew it on the river."

"She drew the plat," Absalom said.

"She drew it to hide it," Dewey said. "She did not put him in the ground. We did." And then, lower, the thing he had carried so long the carrying had bent him to its shape: "I did."

Absalom sat up on the feed sacks. His right hand, when he put it down to push himself up, would not flatten against the boards; it never had, not since the summer the boy went in the water; it sat under him curled like a dead bird, taking his weight on its knuckles. He had pushed himself up off that ruined hand for fifteen years and never once named the reason out loud. He named it now, into the dark, where the river could hear.

"You did not kill Asa Greer," he said.

"Don't." Dewey's voice cracked across the word. "Don't you do it again. You have spent my whole life telling me it was your hand and I have let you. God forgive me, Daddy, I let you stand up under it because it was easier to be your son than to be what I am. But I am thirty-three years old, I have got Ruth and three babies and a piece of paper that lets me leave this place, and I cannot leave it. Because every time I shut my eyes I am back on them rocks with my hands on his throat, pushing him down, and I will not lie to a sheriff to keep on lying to myself. I hit him till he quit. I drove him into that water. It was me."

The river listened.

Absalom got up off the pallet and crossed the little space and put his crooked right hand on his son's chest, flat as it would go, which was not flat, which was a claw laid over a heart he could feel knocking against it, and held it there.

"Sit down," he said. "I am going to tell you a thing I have never told a living soul, and when I am done you are going to know you are not the one, and you are going to hate me worse than you ever

have, because I let you wear this fifteen year and it was never yours. Sit down, son."

And Dewey, who had not done a thing his father told him in twenty years, sat down on an upturned bushel basket in the dark of the crib like a boy, and put his face in his hands.

Absalom told it.

He told it the way he had laid the stones of the spring-house in his youth, one and then the next, fitting each cold true thing against the last. He told how he had heard it from the house that July night — not the fight, that was too far off and the river too loud, but Verlie sitting straight up in the bed saying *Cora's gone, her bed is empty, Absalom, go*, and how he had gone down the path with no lantern because his feet knew it, toward the ford where the still was and where, God help him, he had known in his gut his girl had slipped off to. He told how he had come on them in the broke moonlight, and the first thing he saw was not Dewey and not Asa but Cora — fourteen years old, his baby, backed against the big rock with her dress torn off one shoulder and a creek stone the size of a hen's egg in her two hands, and Asa Greer down on one knee in the shallows with his hand to his head, blood black through his fingers, and the boy cursing her, calling her names Absalom would not let himself say even now, even to her brother, in the dark.

"She had hit him," Absalom said. "Our Cora. He had laid hands on her and meant her worse and she caught up a rock off the bottom and laid him a lick across the temple to get loose. She was fighting for her life, do you hear me. She staggered him. He went down on his knee with his head running blood and was coming back up cursing her and reaching, and that is when you come."

"I come down through the willows," Dewey said into his hands. "I heard her."

"You heard her holler and you come down through the willows like the side of the mountain coming down," Absalom said, "and you took him off her. And I will not say you were wrong to. I have thanked God on my knees fifteen years that you come when you come. You hit him. You hit him and hit him and you both went down in the shallows fighting, and I could not get to you for the dark and the rocks, and when I did —" He stopped. His ruined

hand closed as far as it would close, which was halfway, a fist that would not finish being a fist. "You had him down and he had quit fighting and you were holding him under, and I thought — Dewey, look at me — I thought you would kill him. Not that you had. That you would. There is the whole of it. He was struggling yet, I felt it, I got my hands in and hauled you off of him, and I had him by the front of his shirt to drag him to the bank, and he come up out of that water swinging at me, alive, do you hear, alive and swinging, and I hit him."

The river. The corn. Their breathing in the dark.

"I hit him one time," Absalom said, "with this hand. I caught him square on the jaw with everything sixty year of this work had put in my arm, and I felt the bones go in my own hand the same instant his head went over, and I have not closed this hand since, not once. It set crooked and stayed crooked and has been the truest record of that night I own — truer than the stone, truer than Cora's paper, truer than anything the sheriff is going to hold up at Renfro's tomorrow. And he went backward off the rocks into the channel where the water was running high and brown and eight foot over its summer self, and the river took him, son. Took him out of all our hands at once. We none of us saw him go under, and by the time we found him, two day down past the camp, there was no telling whose was the blow that did it. A doctor in the county seat said drownt and it was drownt. Water in the lungs. He went into the river alive and breathing and came out drownt, and every one of us — the girl with her stone, you with your two hands, me with this — got to spend the rest of our lives certain sure that it was him, his own sin and nobody else's, that drove that boy under."

Dewey lifted his head, his face a pale smear in the dark, wet.

"Then it was all of us," he said.

"It was all of us," Absalom said, "and it was the river, and it was that boy his own self, who put his hands on a child of mine. I have studied it fifteen year, and I will tell you what I have come to, and it is the truth as God gives me to see it. There was not one hand killed Asa Greer. There was four. Hers and yours and mine and the river's, and not a one acting without the other three, and not a one of us innocent and not a one alone to blame. I let you

think it was you because you were young and had a life to build and I judged you could not build it on that ground. And I was wrong to. A man cannot give his sin to his son for safekeeping. It does not keep. It grows in the dark, like seed corn left too long — it sprouts in the sack and rots the whole bushel. I have rotted you, Dewey, and I am sorry. I would have died with it shut up in me and let the water have it, but the water would not take it. The water gave it back.”

Dewey wept then, the way a grown man weeps, almost without sound, his shoulders going, and Absalom stood over him and put his broken hand on his son’s bent head and left it there, and that was as near as the two of them had come to one another in their lives.

After a while Dewey said, thick: “Why did she do it. Mama. Why put him under the baby’s stone. I never could ask her while she lived. I was afraid of the answer.”

Absalom sat back down on the feed sacks. This was the other thing — the thing he had hidden inside the hidden thing, the kernel inside the kernel — and he found that he wanted to tell it, that of the whole black night it was the one part that did not poison.

“You know we had a Asa before you,” he said. “My baby brother. Died the spring of eighteen and eighty, not a year old, and they buried him on the ridge and there was no money for a stone, never was, and the little grave just sunk and grassed over and the name got carried in the Bible and nowhere else. Asa Tipton. Your mama never knew him; he was dead before I courted her. But she knew the name, and the sunk place in the grass, and she used to weed it.” He was quiet a moment. “And there was a second one, son, that you do not know of, that we never spoke of in your hearing. Your mama bore me a boy the winter of nineteen and six, after you and before Cora, and she named him Asa for the little dead uncle, and he lived eleven days and no more. Eleven days. And when he died I went to cut him a stone and she would not let me. She said one Asa Tipton was already up there nameless under the grass and she would not have two; she said lay the baby in by the brother and let the one name stand for the both of them, the way it would have to stand for all the Asas there would ever be, since the Lord

did not seem to mean to let us keep one. She grieved that name twice, Dewey. Buried it twice and would not carve it once. So all them years she would go up of a Decoration Day and weed that one little corner, the brother she never laid eyes on and the son she held eleven days, both of them under the grass with no board between them and the sky, because she said no soul ought to lie nameless with the wild rose over it and not a thing to say it had been here and been loved.”

He stopped. The lake breathed against the dark.

“The night we brought Asa Greer up from the river,” he said, “two day after, swole and ruint, with the county satisfied it was a accident and the Greers half-believing he had run off, and us not daring to put him in the Greer plot where it would be looked at close — I did not know what to do with him. I was going to put him in the ground anywhere, in the dark, unmarked, like a dog, and let the world think the Greer boy had lit out for Knoxville. I cared for nothing but you and Cora and getting it covered. It was your mama stopped me. She come up the ridge in the dark with me carrying the lantern, and when I went to dig in the corner, in the weeds, she said no. Not nameless. Not even him, not even this boy that had done what he done to her daughter — *especially* not him, she said, for he was past doing harm now and there was no use hating a drownt boy. And she took me by the arm to the little sunk place she had weeded all them years and said, put him here. Put him with our Asas. Lay the big one over the little ones and let the one stone serve them all. All her married life she had grieved that corner with no marker on it, two babies of that name in the ground and never a board to say so, because she would not be talked into a second stone when the first grave still wanted its own — and now, she said, and Dewey, she was crying, crying for the boy that hurt her own child, now there will be a stone over our Asas at last, and it will say true, *Asa Tipton, 1880*, the year of the firstborn, and it will not be a lie, it will be the truth about the ones underneath and a mercy over the one we are laying on top, and God will know which is which and so will I, and let that be enough.”

Absalom’s voice had gone to almost nothing.

“So we buried Asa Greer under the name of two Tipton babies

that never had one between them,” he said, “and your mama got the only thing she ever asked God for, a name in stone over a nameless grave, and she got it by laying it over the body of the boy that broke our Cora. That was your mama. She could turn the worst night of her life into a kindness with her own two hands in the dark. I never could. I have only ever been able to keep things hid. But she could turn grief into grace like she turned wool into thread, and I married her for it, and I have missed her every hour since, and I am glad to God she is in her own ground up there and not down here to see them lift that boy back into the daylight and turn her one mercy into a crime.”

Dewey was quiet a long time.

“It is not a crime, what she done,” he said finally. “It is the only clean thing in the whole of it.”

“The law will not see it that way.”

“The law was not on the ridge that night,” Dewey said. “The law did not weed that grave forty year.” He stood up off the bushel basket, and Absalom heard in the movement something he had not heard in his son in a long time — a man deciding to stand up under a weight on purpose, the way you choose to lift the heavy end. “I am going down to Renfro’s at light, and I am going to tell the sheriff what I told you. All of it. And then you are going to come down and tell him what you told me, and Cora is going to quit trying to carry it by herself, and we are going to set it down where it can be looked at, in the daylight, like Mama would have. No more hiding. The hiding is what rotted us. You said so yourself.”

Absalom looked at his son’s shape against the faint gray coming, finally, up the eastern ridge — the gray that meant the gates were one day nearer closing and the water one inch nearer the house.

“They could take you from your babies,” he said. “Concealing. They have words for it.”

“Then they take me,” Dewey said. “I would rather be took for the truth than walk free another fifteen year on a lie. I have walked free on it. It is no kind of free.” He stepped out into the cold, then stopped and turned back, his voice soft out of the lightening dark. “Come down with me, Daddy. Don’t make me stand up there by myself. It was four hands. You said. Let it be four hands that

owns it.”

And Absalom Tipton sat in the corn crib that the water would have by Christmas, his ruined hand open as far as it would open in his lap, palm up, the way a man holds out a hand for something to be put into it, and listened to his son go down the path toward the lake that had given back what it was never asked to keep. After a while he reached for his coat.

Chapter Twenty-Two —

Ila

Cora went to tell her alone.

She would not let them send the sheriff, nor Wendell, nor even Dewey, who had offered, gray-faced, having just come down off the ridge himself with the whole of it spoken at last. *It ought to be me*, Cora had said, in the road by Renfro's with the necktied man from Knoxville and the county sheriff standing in the cold not knowing yet what to do with a confession that had four hands in it and a dead woman's mercy at the bottom. *I am the one drew the plat to hide her. I am the one let her go on saying it down at the store and never once told her she was right. If anybody is to take the truth up to Ila Greer it is me, and I am going by myself, and I am going now, before the daylight gives me time to turn coward.*

So she walked down off the camp road and along the slough path in the raw morning toward the falling house below the red, the house that the backwater had already crept to within a stone's throw of, so that Ila Greer was living now on a little dwindling island of her own grief with the lake coming up gray and patient through the dead grass at the foot of her steps.

The fiddle was the first thing Cora saw when the door opened.

It hung on the wall behind Ila where another woman would have hung a calendar or a sampler or a picture of the Lord — hung from a nail by its scroll, the wood gone amber-dark with age and neglect, two of its strings broke and curled, and a fine gray felt of dust laid over the belly of it that told Cora it had not been touched in years, had only been kept, the way you keep a thing you cannot play and cannot bury. Asa's fiddle. She had last seen it under his chin in the firelight at the ford in another life, the bow flying, the boys'

faces shining, her own fourteen-year-old heart going up like a struck match. It hung now on a wall below the waterline in a house three weeks from drowning, and Cora stood on the doorsill and could not, for a moment, speak at all.

“You,” said Ila Greer.

She was small and dried, smaller than Cora remembered, her hair come loose and white around a face that had been pretty once the way Asa had been handsome, the same long bones, the same dark eyes, only in her the fire had been put out long ago and left the lamp standing. She had a man’s coat on over her dress against the cold of the house and her feet were in broke shoes and she looked at Cora out of those burnt-out eyes and she did not seem surprised, and that was the worst of it, that was the thing that nearly turned Cora around in the door — Ila Greer did not seem the least bit surprised to find a Tipton on her step at last, fifteen years late.

“Mrs. Greer,” Cora said. “I have come to tell you something. May I come in. It is going to be hard, and you had better be sitting down, and I had better be too.”

Ila looked at her a long moment. Then she stepped back from the door.

The room was nearly bare. They had not bought her out — she had refused it, every dollar, the same as she refused everything the dam offered — and so the TVA had simply drawn its line and let the water come, and she had been carrying her own life out by the armload to nowhere, and most of it was gone, and what was left was the bed and a table and two chairs and the cold stove and the fiddle on the wall and, on the table, weighted under a smooth river stone, a single sheet of paper gone soft and brown as a leaf.

Cora knew it for a letter before she knew anything else in the room.

They sat. Ila folded her hands on the table by the stone-weighted paper and waited, and Cora found that all the careful words she had built on the walk down had gone out of her, the way the figures would sometimes go out of her at the worst moments, and there was nothing left but to lay it down plain, one stone fitted true against the next, the way she had been taught by a man she now knew had spent his life doing the opposite.

“You have said for fifteen years that Asa was not in that ground on the ridge,” Cora said. “You have said he was still down here by the water, waiting on you. The valley let you say it. They thought you were broke down with grief. They were kind to you the way you are kind to somebody you have stopped believing.” She made herself hold the old woman’s eyes. “You were not broke down, Mrs. Greer. You were right. You have been right the whole time, and every soul in this hollow that ever hushed you or humored you or looked away — myself the worst of them — was wrong, and you were right, and I have come to tell you so before God and the county and whoever else needs to hear it. Asa is not in that ground the way they buried it. He never run off to Knoxville. He has been here. By the water. The way you always said. And the water has come up to get him now, and it has made everybody finally look, and they have looked, and you were right.”

Ila Greer did not move. The lake breathed at the foot of the steps.

“Say the rest of it,” she said.

So Cora said the rest of it. She told her about the night at the ford — not sparing herself, not sparing any of them, the stone in her own child’s hands, her brother’s fists, her father’s broken blow, the high brown water that took the boy out of all their hands at once and gave him back drowned. She told her there was no one hand to hang it on, that they had all of them carried it as a single guilt for fifteen years precisely because to share it out felt like letting the river be to blame, and they had none of them been able to forgive the river its indifference, and so they had each kept the whole crime locked in their own breast. She told her how they had been afraid to lay him in the Greer plot where the county would look close, and how Verlie Tipton had come up the ridge in the dark and would not let the boy go nameless into the weeds — and here Cora’s voice broke for the first time, and she let it, because the old woman across the table deserved to see it cost something — how her mother had laid Asa Greer to rest under the stone of a Tipton baby dead in eighteen and eighty, had given him at last a name cut in stone over his head, even him, even the boy who had hurt her daughter, because Verlie Tipton could not abide a soul

lying nameless in the ground.

“My mother buried your son like he was her own,” Cora said. “Under her own dead baby’s name — for there were two Tipton babies of that name already in that corner, my father’s little brother and a boy of my mother’s own that lived not two weeks, and she had grieved that name into the ground twice before ever your Asa came to it. She tended that grave the rest of her life. She did not know I knew, but I knew, I saw her go up there, I saw her on her knees in that corner pulling the wild rose back so the carving would show. She loved that grave, Mrs. Greer. I used to think it was her own babies. I think now it was all three of them. I think she was the only one of us that ever once thought of your boy as anything but the worst thing that happened to our family, and she thought of him as a child that needed a name and she gave him one, and I am sorry it was the wrong name, I am sorry it was a lie laid on top of a mercy, but I want you to know that for fifteen years your son has lain under a stone that somebody on her knees was glad to keep clean.”

Ila Greer reached out then and slid the smooth river stone off the brown letter, and unfolded the soft paper with hands that did not shake, that were steadier than Cora’s had been in days, and turned it on the table so that Cora could see.

It was a child’s letter. The hand was big and round and uncertain, the spelling a boy’s, the lines climbing crooked off the level the way a young one’s writing always did before somebody taught him to rule a margin. *Dear Mama. I am at the Tiptons. Mister Tipton says I can stay and help with the corn and Dewey is teaching me the fiddle from his uncle that learned in Virginia. I et good. Do not worry over me. I will bring my wages. Your boy Asa.* It was dated in a summer twenty-two years gone. The boy in it was nine years old.

“He was always over to your place,” Ila said. Her voice was low and even and terrible in its steadiness. “From a little chap. His own daddy was no account and gone and your daddy let him hang about the farm and your mama fed him at her table same as her own, and Dewey was the brother he never had, and that fiddle —” she lifted her chin at the wall — “that fiddle was your uncle’s, did

you know that. Dewey's uncle's, that died. Your mama give it to my Asa when he was twelve year old because he had the gift and they did not, and she said a fiddle ought to go where the music is. So you see." She folded the letter back along its soft worn creases, slow, the way you fold a thing you have folded ten thousand times. "You have come down here to tell me your mama buried my boy like her own. I knew your mama buried my boy like her own. She had been mothering him since he was nine year old. The only thing I did not know was where. And now you have told me where, and I thank you, because a mother ought to know where her child is laid, even if it took you all fifteen year and a army of the government to bring it to my door."

Cora could not speak.

"Set still," Ila said. "I am not done. You think you have come to give me a hard thing. You have come to give me the only easy thing I have had since 1921. Do you understand me, girl? For fifteen year I have known he was here and not been able to make a soul believe me, and they have prayed over me and brought me pies and looked at me sideways, and I have laid in that bed of a night hearing the river and knowing my boy was in it somewhere and not able to so much as lay a flower, because there was no place to lay it. You think the truth is the hard thing. The lie was the hard thing. The lie I have lived in fifteen year. The truth is a door opening."

She stood up, then, small and straight in the man's coat, and went to the wall and took the fiddle down off its nail with great care, and blew the dust off the belly of it so that it rose in the cold light from the window, and held it against herself the way you hold a child, or the memory of one.

"Now," she said. "You said the water has come to get him. You said they have looked. So somebody is fixing to dig my boy up and carry him off in a box. Is that the way of it. With your numbers and your government."

"Yes," Cora said. "To Sawmill Ridge. The new ground, above the line. They are moving all the dead up there before the gates close. Your son and my mother and all of them. It is the law. I drew the map of it."

Ila stood holding the fiddle and looked out the window at the gray water standing in her own dead dooryard.

"He always did love this water," she said. "That is the cruelty of it. He drownt in the thing he loved best in the world. He would lay out on the gravel bar of a evening and play to it." She was quiet. The lake breathed. "I have said for fifteen year he was to stay by the water. I said it for spite, partly, when nobody would hear me, because it was the only true thing I had and they would not let me have it. But I have studied on it since you knocked, and I will tell you what I have come to." She turned from the window. "He cannot stay by the water. The water is fixing to be eighty foot deep over that ridge. To leave him is not to leave him by the water. It is to leave him under it, in the dark, where no soul can come, forever. That is not what I meant. I never meant that." Her chin came up. "You take him up. You raise my boy out of that doomed ground and you carry him to the high place where I can climb to him on my own two feet and lay a flower in the daylight before I die. You have my leave. Write it on your paper. I will make my mark."

"There is a question of the name," Cora said, very gently. "On the new stone."

And here Ila Greer was quiet for the longest time of all, holding her dead son's fiddle, the broke strings curling at the scroll, and when she spoke at last her voice had gone soft, almost a girl's voice, almost the voice she must have had before the fire in her went out.

"Your mama wanted a name in stone over a nameless baby," she said, "and she got it, and it was a comfort to her, you say, all them years. I will not take it off her. Let the babies keep that stone up there, the real Asa Tiptons, the little uncle and your mama's own that never had nothing, neither one — let them keep the name at last, the one your mama cut for the both of them, on the high ground, clean." She looked at the fiddle. "But my boy will have his own. Cut beside it, near as you can, his own stone, his own name, the truth of him. *Asa Greer*. And the years, the real years, nineteen oh two to nineteen and twenty-one. And under it —" her voice did not break, it only gentled, the way the river gentles going into still water — "he played the old tunes by the water, that boy — played to it of an evening till the bats come out, and in the end

it took him, the thing he loved best. But that is mine to keep, and it does not need cutting in a rock for strangers to read. The words that go under his name I leave to you. You knew him once, and your mama always said Verlie Tipton's girl could draw a thing truer than the thing itself. So you find what to cut. Only let it say he was found — that he is not lost no more, nor run off, nor down in the dark water where I cannot come, but brought up into the daylight at the last with his right name over him. And let the two stones stand side by side up there above the lake, the Tipton babies and the Greer boy, the way your mama tried to make it once in the dark with the only mercy she had. Two names. Side by side. The way it should have been all along."

Cora took out her field book, there at the bare table in the drowning house, and uncapped her pen, and wrote it down in the small upright hand that had carried her out of these mountains and brought her, at last, all the way back — *Greer plot, relocate; consent given; two stones, side by side* — and her hand, for the first time in fifteen years of holding things still while the world came apart, was perfectly steady, and she understood that it was steady not because she had gone numb to the thing in front of her but because, finally, she had not.

Chapter Twenty-Three — Condemnation

The necktied man had a name, and the name did not matter, because by the time Cora came back up from Ila Greer's the whole of it had stopped being about names and started being about jurisdiction.

They were in the back room at Renfro's — the dam having no office in the hollow itself and the church being a place nobody wanted to do this kind of business — at the long table where the men used to play rook, and the cold stove had been lit for once, and there were too many of them in the little room. The Hawkin County sheriff, a heavy slow man named Combs — kin to the hollow Combses, the widow up the branch and the old man whose door Junior had painted, the way half of Cane Hollow was kin to the other half — who had known the Tiptons all his life and plainly wished he were anywhere on earth but here. A deputy. The man from Knoxville in the necktie, who turned out to be from the office of the General Counsel, which Cora understood to mean lawyers, which she understood to mean the machine had stopped being benevolent and started being a machine. Pruitt the clerk, gray and bloodless, with a leather case of forms. And Wendell Frame, standing apart at the cold window with his hat in his hands, who would not look at her when she came in.

That was the thing that went into her first, before any of the rest. Wendell would not look at her.

"Miss Tipton." The lawyer did not stand. He had a folder open in front of him, and Cora's own work was in it — she could see the corner of the cemetery plat, her linen drawing, her ink, her lie — and he laid two fingers on it as he spoke, the way Renfro had laid

his hands flat on the counter, the way her father had laid his broken hand on her brother's chest, men everywhere in this story pressing their hands down on the truth as if it might rise. "I will be plain with you, because you strike me as a plain woman and the hour is late and getting later. You are in a very great deal of trouble."

"I know it," Cora said.

"I am not sure you do." He turned the plat so it faced her. "This is a federal record. You prepared it. On it you have recorded the grave of one Asa Tipton, born eighteen and eighty, as unmarked, and routed it for removal to common ground at Sawmill Ridge without family identification. We now know that to be false in every particular. The grave was marked. The remains are not those of an infant. They are, by your own family's account given in this room not two hours ago, the remains of Asa Greer, deceased eighteen-and-something, under circumstances that the State of Tennessee may have an interest in even at this remove. You drew this plat knowing all of it. That is falsification of a federal record. It is also, depending on how the county wishes to look at the events of 1921, after-the-fact concealment of a death that was never properly inquired into." He sat back. "Do you understand the position you have put yourself in. And, I will add, the position you have put this Authority in, three weeks before we close the gates on a forty-million-dollar project, with a body and a fifteen-year-old killing surfacing out of a grave that one of our own employees drew a false map to hide."

"I understand it," Cora said.

"She drew the map," said Wendell Frame from the window, "because I sent her up here to close her own family's parcel. Which I should not have done, and which I knew I should not have done, and which I did because she was good and because it was efficient and because I had a quota out of Knoxville." He turned from the window at last, and looked at the lawyer, and not at Cora, still not at Cora. "If we are going to lay things on the table, let us lay that one. I put a woman to drawing the map of her own dead. The Authority did that. Before we hang a falsified record on her, somebody ought to write down who handed her the pen."

The lawyer looked at him with the flat patience of a man who

has heard underlings make speeches before. "Mr. Frame. Your conscience is noted. It is not, at present, relevant to the law."

"No," Wendell said. "I have noticed that about the law up here."

The sheriff stirred. "Now, look," Combs said heavily. "I knowed Absalom Tipton forty year. I knowed Verlie. I will tell you what I am not going to do, which is haul a sixty-one-year-old man and a tenant farmer with three babies down to the county seat over a drowning that a doctor ruled a accident in nineteen and twenty-one, on the say-so of the men themselves walking in and confessing to it out of pure grief, with no witness living to contradict a word and the only evidence eighty foot under water in three weeks' time. I would be laughed out of the courthouse. I would be voted out at the next election, and I would deserve to be. That boy put his hands on a fourteen-year-old girl. Every man in this room knows what we would have done in 'twenty-one if we had knowed it then, and it would not have been to charge the Tiptons." He folded his thick arms. "I will write it up as I have to write it up. The grave is mismarked, the record is wrong, it gets corrected. The death gets noted reopened and closed the same day, accidental drowning, which it was, the doctor was not wrong, the boy drown't. That is the county's part and I am done with it and I am going home."

The lawyer's jaw worked. "There remains the federal record."

And there it sat. Because the county would let it go — Combs had as good as said the hollow's own rough justice had ruled on Asa Greer fifteen years before any of them set foot in that room, and would not be unrul'd now — but the falsified plat was the dam's, was Washington's, was the machine's, and the machine did not forgive a lie told inside its own ledgers. Cora watched the lawyer understand that he had lost the body and the killing and meant now to have the document, because the document was the only thing in the room that belonged to him. She had spent her whole life believing that to draw a thing true was the one clean act left to a person. She had drawn one thing false, once, to spare the living, and it was the false drawing and not the true ones that was going to cost her everything.

"The plat will have to be marked as falsified," the lawyer said, "and the preparer's certification withdrawn, and a report made to

Knoxville, and I will be candid, Miss Tipton, the certification is your livelihood. You will not draw for this Authority again. You may not draw for any federal survey again. There may be more than that. I cannot promise you there will not be more than that.”

“I know what I drew,” Cora said. “I will sign whatever says I drew it. I am not going to stand here and let my father or my brother or that woman down at the slough take one ounce of it. I drew the plat. I knew it was false when I drew it. Write that, and I will put my name to it, the same name that is on the plat, and then it will be one true thing and one false thing in your folder both signed by the same hand, and you can make of that what you want.”

For a moment nobody said anything. The stove ticked.

It was Junior Sealy who spoke.

He had been standing by the door the whole while with his cap in his hands, having driven the survey truck down and not been told to leave, the way nobody ever remembered to tell the rodman to leave, and Cora had half forgotten he was there. He cleared his throat, and went red, and looked like he wished he had not started, and then went on anyway, the way Cora had watched him go on once before, in the commissary dawn, saying the thing that cost him.

“That plat ain’t the only record,” Junior said.

The lawyer turned. “I beg your pardon.”

“The cemetery plat.” Junior swallowed. “It ain’t the only one. There is a field book. I carry the rod, but I have watched her keep that field book six weeks, and the field book is the rough, the raw shots, what we read off the ground, and the plat is drawed up clean off of the field book after. That is how it goes. The field is the truth and the plat is the fair copy.” He looked at Cora, quick, frightened, and then at the floor. “I am only saying. The field book on the Burnt Ridge cemetery — I seen her keep it. The grave numbers in the field book run different than the plat. There is a number, up in the corner of that plot, that has got a query mark by it in the field book and a little note. I seen it the day we shot the ridge. She queried that grave the very first day, before ever there was a plat to forge. It is in her own hand, in the rough, weeks back. *Stone*

and register disagree — verify.” He turned the cap in his hands. “That don’t sound to me like a body setting out to hide a thing. That sounds to me like a surveyor that found a thing wrong on the ground and wrote it down, the way you are supposed to, and then —” he faltered — “and then got to the part where the wrong thing was her own kin in the ground, and lost her nerve on the fair copy. Anybody would. I would have. But the truth is in the field book. It was always in the field book. She wrote it down the first day. You ought to read the rough before you withdraw the lady’s whole life over the fair copy.”

The lawyer looked at Junior Sealy for a long moment, the long-boned hollow boy in the too-big coat who held the rod and drove the stakes and had no standing in that room whatsoever, and something shifted behind the lawyer’s eyes — not mercy, Cora thought, the man did not have mercy in him, but the recognition of a complication, which to a lawyer was a kind of door.

“Is that true,” he said to Cora. “Is there a field book with a contemporaneous notation.”

And Cora, who had walked into that room having decided to carry the whole weight herself, having decided that taking all of it was the last clean act available to her, understood that the boy had just done the thing the bible of her own heart had not let her do — had refused, quietly, at no order, to let her drown alone; had held up the one record she had forgotten was even a record, the rough, the raw, the true first thing written before the lie. *Stone and register disagree — verify.* She had written it on the ridge the first cold morning with her hands gone wrong on the instrument, and then she had spent six weeks trying to unwrite it, and she could not unwrite it, because the truth, once you set it down in the field, will not stay in the fair copy’s lie. The field is the truth and the plat is the fair copy. She had taught the boy that herself, and he had handed it back to her like a thing he was returning.

“Yes,” Cora said. “It is in the truck. I will get it.”

“That,” said the lawyer slowly, gathering his folder, “may make a difference to Knoxville. A surveyor who flagged a discrepancy in the rough field notes and was subsequently slow to reconcile it on the finished drawing is a different matter than one who falsified

from the outset. I make you no promises. But get the book.”

He stood. The county sheriff was already pulling on his coat, done with all of it. The deputy followed. Pruitt clicked his case shut. And the room, which had come into being to condemn her, broke up the way a frost breaks up off a field in the sun, into men with somewhere else to be, and Cora was left standing by the rook table with her false drawing on top of the folder and her true one waiting in the truck, three weeks from the gates closing, her livelihood spent and her family spared and the boy who had spared the rest of her looking at his own boots in an agony of having spoken.

Wendell Frame came across the room to her last.

He stood close, and for the first time since she had walked in he looked at her, full, and she saw in his face the whole of what it had cost him — the true believer, the man who loved the dam the way her father loved Scripture, who had spent six months telling holdouts that the light and the jobs and the end of the floods were worth any grave, made to stand in a back room and watch the machine he believed in try to grind down a woman he had come, against all his quotas, to love.

“I cannot fix this,” he said, low. “I want you to know I tried, before you came in, and I will keep on, in Knoxville, where it counts, and it may not be enough. I sent you up here. I will write that down on every paper they put in front of me until somebody believes it was me handed you the pen.” He stopped. “I believe in the dam, Cora. I still do. I believe in the light and I believe in the children that will not die of the typhoid and I believe in all of it, and I have learned this autumn that you can believe in a thing with your whole heart and still it asks you to drown something you cannot afford to lose, and it does not even know it is asking. That is the part nobody told me when I took the work. The machine does not know what it costs. Somebody has to know for it. I reckon that is what you are for. I reckon that is what the boy is for.” He glanced at Junior. “I reckon it is what I am going to have to be for, the rest of my life.”

“Go to Knoxville, then,” Cora said. “And know it for them, loud.”

“I will.” He put his hat on. At the door he turned back, the

way they all turned back, this whole valley of people who could not quite leave a thing unsaid. "It was four hands, your brother told them. On the boy. Four hands and the river." He was quiet. "There is a kind of grief in the dam that is the same. Nobody's one hand. Everybody's. The river's, finally. Maybe that is the only honest way anything terrible ever gets done in this country. Four hands and the water." He looked at her a moment longer. "I am glad it was your hand on the map, Cora. I would not have wanted it to be somebody who could draw it false and sleep."

Then he went out into the cold, and the bell over Renfro's door rang him into the gray, and Cora Tipton stood alone in the back room of the dying store with three weeks left and her name about to be struck from the rolls she had given her life to, and went out to the truck to fetch the one true book she had never been able to forge, and found, going, that she was not afraid — that for the first time since she was fourteen years old on a wet rock in the moonlight, she was not afraid of being seen entire.

Chapter Twenty-Four — High Water

The water took the lower hollow the way frost takes a garden — not all at once, but overnight, and then again the next night, so that each morning the line of it stood somewhere it had not stood before, and you measured your losses by what had been on dry ground at supper and was gone by the time you came out to milk. Cora had stopped trusting the marks she set. She would drive a lath at the edge of the backwater in the evening, paint a band on it at the waterline so she could read the night's rise, and by full light the lath would be standing in two feet of slack brown water with the band drowned and the river already feeling past it toward the next thing it meant to have. There was no measuring it. That was what undid her, more than the cold or the hours or the work itself. She had built her life on the faith that a thing held still could be read true, and the water would not hold still, and it would not be read, and it was coming for the church and the school and the dead on the ridge, and she had eight days, by Wendell's count, perhaps fewer by the river's.

They had begun taking the hollow apart so it would not have to be drowned standing.

It was a strange grief, that work — stranger than burning, which some had done, walking out of houses their grandfathers built and setting a match to the dry shake roof and standing in the road to watch it go rather than leave it for the lake to rot. The dismantling was worse because it was tender. It was a place being undressed by the people who loved it. Up at the church they had taken the bell down on the second day, and Cora had been there for it, not because the job required her but because she could not make herself be

anywhere else. Six men on the roof with a block and tackle rigged to the king post, and Reverend Buckles below in the churchyard with his ruined eyes turned up toward the steeple, calling instructions he could not see the result of, going on memory the way he went on memory for everything now. The bell came down out of the louvers slow, turning a little on the rope, catching the gray light on its lip. It had hung up there since 1887. It had rung for every burial on Burnt Ridge for fifty years, including, Cora thought and could not stop thinking, the one that was a lie. When the men set it down in the wagon bed it struck the boards and gave one half-note, dull and flat, a sound with no air under it, and an old woman standing at the churchyard fence made a noise Cora had heard only twice before in her life and never wanted to hear again.

She wrote it in the field book anyway. *Bell removed, Cane Hollow F.W.B., to be rehung Sawmill Ridge.* The pen did its old work of turning the unbearable into a line in a column, and she let it, because the alternative was to stand in the churchyard and come apart in front of the whole valley, and she had not earned that. The valley had earned that. She had only earned the writing of it down.

The schoolhouse went the same week. It was a one-room building of squared logs chinked with clay and faced over with planed board, and it came apart in reverse of how it had gone up, the board first, then the chinking knocked out in dry gray chunks, then the logs lifted off one by one and numbered in keel along the butt end — I, II, III — so a man could raise it again on the ridge in the same order, the same wall to the same weather. Cora found she could not watch the numbering without her chest going tight, because the numbering was her own kind of work, the same instinct, the same faith: that if you marked a thing precisely enough you could carry it somewhere else and it would still be itself. She did not believe that anymore. You could number every log of a schoolhouse and raise it true on Sawmill Ridge and it would be a building, a good and useful building, and it would not be the school. The school was the smell of forty years of children and woodsmoke and slate dust and the particular cold of a January morning before the stove caught, and that did not number, and that did not move, and the

water was going to have it.

But it was the dead that were the worst of it, and the dead were her job.

Roy Hicks worked the ridge with a crew of six and a wagon and a stack of fresh-planed pine boxes, smaller than coffins, square at the ends, each one numbered on the lid in the same black keel the schoolhouse logs wore. Cora's plat told him where to dig. That was the arrangement now, since the thing that had happened at the Tipton plot, since the locket — since Roy had stood in front of her on the ridge with that small tarnished weight in his open palm and her own girlhood initials scratched inside it and said, not unkindly, *I believe this belongs to your family*, and the fifteen years had gone out from under her like a rotten step. The plat was honest now. She had made it honest. After Wendell, after the county, after the long terrible accounting that had cost her the forged sheet and very nearly the job and might yet cost her more than that, she had redrawn the whole cemetery true, every grave it held, the marked and the unmarked and the one that had been both — and she handed Roy Hicks her drawings the way she had never handed anyone anything in her life, which was to say with nothing held back.

So she knew the names now, going up the mountain in the boxes. That was the price of an honest plat. You could not hide behind it anymore.

Asa Tipton, infant, no dates of his own, only the soft place in the ground where a stone had never stood — Verlie's eleven-day boy, the second of that name, the one she had borne and would not let be carved. Verlie's mother. A Renfro, two Sealys, a whole row of Hicks that Roy dug with no change in his face at all, which Cora understood by then was its own kind of grief, the grief of a man who had made himself a tool so the work could be done at all. They came out of the ground as what the ground had left of them — less than you feared and more than you could bear, a long shape of dark earth that was a little darker and held its line a little too well, and here and there the pale curve of a thing the eye knew before the mind would say it. Roy and his men lifted each one onto a board and into a box with a gentleness that Cora had not expected and

could not have done herself, and set the lid, and Cora wrote the number and the name and the new plot assignment, I to Sawmill 14, II to Sawmill 15, the dead of Cane Hollow leaving the valley feet first and numbered, going up to a poor-draining piece of ground above a line they had never heard of, to lie among strangers from drowned hollows they had never visited, under stones that would have to be cut new because the old stones would not all come, and some of the old stones told lies, and one of them told the largest lie in the valley, and Cora knew now exactly which one.

They had not opened Verlie's grave yet. Cora had asked Roy to leave her mother for last, and Roy, who had heard everything by then because everyone had heard everything by then, had only nodded and said he would. It was the one piece of the schedule she still controlled, and she did not examine too closely why she wanted it.

She came down off the ridge at dusk on the seventh day with the field book heavy as a stone in her coat and found Dewey waiting at the truck.

He had a load in his wagon — bedsteads, a churn, a rolled feather tick, the small freight of a life being carried to higher ground — and he had stopped on the road below the cemetery and was leaning on the wheel with his hat off, looking up at the ridge where the fresh dirt of the opened graves showed raw and dark against the dying laurel. He had Lonnie with him, the boy holding the mule's head, and the boy was watching his father not watch the road. They had not spoken much, she and Dewey, since the locket. There had not been words for it yet. The thing between them was too new and too old at once, fifteen years of separate silence cracked open in a single afternoon, and they were both still learning what their voices would do near it.

"They take Mama yet?" Dewey said, when she came up.

"No. I left her for last."

Dewey nodded. He turned his hat in his hands. Up on the ridge a lantern moved — Roy's crew working into the dark to beat the water, the small light swinging among the stones like something looking for a way out. "Ruth wants to be gone before it reaches the road," he said. "She is right. There is no sense being the last

to leave a thing that is leaving anyhow." He said it the way he said most things now, flat and tired, a man stating a fact he had made his peace with so long ago the peace had worn smooth. But his eyes were on the ridge. "I keep thinking I ought to feel it more. Leaving. I have wanted out of this hollow my whole life, Cora. I signed first of anybody. And now the water is coming and all I feel is —" He stopped. His jaw worked. "I do not know what I feel. Like a man stepping off a porch in the dark and the ground not where he thought."

"I know," Cora said.

"You do not," he said, but gently, the gentlest he had been with her, "but I thank you for saying it." He put his hat on. Then he looked at her straight, which he had not done much since the locket, since the afternoon when the two of them had pulled apart the knot of who-did-what at the ford and found, instead of an answer, only the three of them and the river all tangled in it together, no clean thread to pull. "You going to do the stone?" he said. "When they take him up. Asa. Somebody has got to cut what goes over him at Sawmill. Buckles cannot see to do it. The county will cut whatever it is told." He paused. "I would as soon it was you. You are the only one of us that ever knew how to make a true line."

It was, she understood, the nearest thing to forgiveness her brother had in him to give, and he had given it in the only language the two of them had ever fully shared, which was the language of true lines and the cutting of them.

"Ila has to say first," Cora said. "It is her boy. It has been her boy all along, whatever the stone said. I will not cut a thing over him without she tells me to."

Dewey nodded slowly. Up on the ridge the lantern stopped moving, and a man's voice called something down the mountain, and another answered, and the dark came on the way it came on in the hollow, all at once, falling out of the high laurel and pooling in the low ground where the water already was. Lonnie shivered at the mule's head. Dewey reached and put his hand on the boy's neck, and the boy leaned into it, and Cora looked away from the two of them because it was too much, the ordinary tenderness of it, a father and a son on a doomed road with their goods in a wagon,

and all of it about to be water.

"You had better get on while you can see the road," she said.

"Yes." Dewey gathered the lines. Then he stopped, and did not look at her, and said the thing she would carry up the mountain with her that night and for a long time after. "He hurt you, Cora. That summer. At the ford. I knew it and I did nothing, I was off running whiskey and counting on Asa to —" His voice failed and came back rough. "You were fourteen and he hurt you and not one of us ever once said it out loud, not in fifteen years, we just let the river have him and let you carry it like it was yours to carry." He clucked to the mule. The wagon lurched and took up its grinding on the stone. "It was not yours to carry," he said, to the road in front of him, not to her, because he could not have said it to her face and she could not have stood to hear it that way. "Whatever you done with that creek rock. You were a child fighting off a grown man and you done what a body does. It was not yours to carry."

And he drove on down toward the water with his son and his churn and his rolled-up bed, and Cora stood in the falling dark and did not write that down, could not have written it down, the first thing in fifteen years she had let go fully unrecorded, and she found she was weeping, standing alone on the road with the field book heavy in her coat and the lantern moving again up on the ridge among the stones, and she let it come, because there was no one to see, and because some things would not go into a line in a column no matter how steady your hand, and because for the first time since she was fourteen years old someone had told her that the worst night of her life had not been, entire and only, her fault.

The water reached the church road two days later. Cora measured it at first light, drove the lath, painted the band, and knew before she finished that by tomorrow the band would be drowned. The valley was nearly gone up the mountain by then, the living and the dead both, the bell and the numbered logs and the pine boxes, everything that would move, moving. What would not move waited for the slackwater. And up on the ridge, in the dark dirt where the laurel was dying, two graves still stood unopened — Verlie's, that Cora had kept for last, and the one beside it that everyone in the hollow now knew the truth of, the grave that had held a boy under

a baby's name for fifteen years and would soon give him up to be carried, at last, openly, and to be named.

Chapter Twenty-Five — The Last Stand

Absalom Tipton stood on his own porch in the gray of the morning and watched the water come up his pasture.

It had been three days reaching the lower fence. It had taken the bottom corner first, where the ground dipped toward the branch, and the woven wire had gone under so quiet he had not seen it happen — one evening the fence ran down to the tree line as it had run for forty years, and the next morning it ran down into a sheet of still brown water and stopped, the top strand catching the light just under the surface like something drowned with its hand up. The mule had stood at the new edge of its world and would not drink. Absalom did not blame it. The water had no current in it and no sound. It was not the Pigeonroost. The Pigeonroost had been a living thing with a voice, a thing that rose and fell and spoke to you all night through the open window, and this was the river stopped, the river killed and laid out flat, and it was climbing his pasture at the rate of a man's slow walking, a foot a day and sometimes more, toward the house his grandfather's chimney stood in and the ground his wife was buried in.

He had said he would not leave it, and he had meant it, and he meant it still, and he stood on the porch in the cold and waited to find out what that was going to cost.

They had taken Verlie's people off the ridge already. He had watched that too, from up here, the small dark figures of Hicks's crew among the stones and the wagon coming down loaded with the pine boxes, and he had not gone up. He could not have gone up. They had taken the boy too, he knew, or were near to it — the grave beside Verlie's, the one with his dead brother's name on it

and a different death inside it, the lie he and Verlie had laid down in the ground fifteen years gone and meant to keep there forever. It was all in the open now. He had known it would be, from the day the dam people first came up the hollow with their painted stakes, had known the way you know a storm is coming by a change in the air before there is any cloud. You cannot hide a grave from a flood. The water roots up everything. That was Scripture, or near enough — *the floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice* — and the floods would lift up Asa Greer with everything else, and there was no stopping it, and a wiser man, a humbler man, would have bowed to it long ago.

Absalom Tipton was not, and had never been, a humble man. He had confused his stubbornness with his faith for sixty-one years and he was old enough now to half know it and too old to mend it. He set his broken right hand on the porch rail — the hand that had not fully closed since the night at the ford, the hand he had told everyone was a farming hurt and that was, in the one truth he had told straight, broken on a young man's jaw — and he watched the water and waited.

Dewey came first. He came up the road on foot because the road was going under at the bottom and he had left the wagon on high ground, and he came up onto the porch and stood by his father and looked out at the drowning pasture and said nothing for a while, the two of them side by side the way they had not stood in years.

"It is at the lower fence," Dewey said finally.

"I have eyes."

"It will be at the house by Wednesday. Thursday at the outside."

"Then I have got till Thursday."

Dewey was quiet. Then he said, low: "I am not going to argue you out of it. I have tried for two months and I am done. I only come to say —" He stopped. Absalom heard his son swallow. "I been letting you carry it. All these years. The blame for Asa. I let you be the one. Because I believed it was me that done it, me that put him in the water, and I could not stand on the ground knowing it, so I signed my buyout first thing and I let you stay up here and be the martyr over it." He turned and looked at his father, and his face was a man's face now, not a boy's, gone hard and lined with

the same trouble Absalom carried. "And now Cora has gone and told it true, what little of it can be told true, and it turns out it was not me alone, and it was not you alone, and it was not even her alone with that rock, it was all of us and it was the river. And I find I cannot tell which is worse. To be the one that done it, or to be just one more hand in a thing that nobody done and everybody done." He shook his head. "You have stood up here fifteen years owning a thing that was not all yours to own. Same as Cora. Same as me. We are a family of people that would each of us rather be guilty alone than be helpless together. And I am done with it. I am taking my wife and my children to higher ground and I am going to try to be a man that is helpless together with the people he loves, because I am too tired to be guilty alone anymore." He put his hand on his father's shoulder, awkward, the first time he had touched the old man in years. "Come up the mountain, Daddy. The blame is not in this ground. We only ever buried it here. It goes where we go."

Absalom did not answer. He looked at the water. After a while Dewey took his hand away and went back down the road that was going under, and Absalom stood alone again and let his son's words move through him and find no purchase, the way water finds no purchase on a stone, and run off, and leave him where he was.

Wendell Frame came in the afternoon, by boat.

That was the thing that told Absalom how late it had gotten — that the section chief came up his own pasture in a flat-bottomed johnboat, two men at the oars, gliding in over the drowned fence and the drowned garden and the drowned smokehouse path, tying off at last to the corner post of the porch itself, which yesterday had been ten feet up a dry slope. Frame climbed out onto the porch steps that now stood at the water's edge and took off his hat, and he had papers, of course he had papers, a man like that always had papers, but Absalom saw that he held them loose and low, almost ashamed of them.

"Mr. Tipton." Frame was younger than Absalom had pictured the government to be, and tired. "I have got a court order here. Condemnation. It says I can have the marshals up here tomorrow to carry you off this porch, and I will be honest with you, because

I have stopped believing the other way works — I do not want to use it. There is a marshal down at the camp would do it without a thought, and he is asking me every hour why I have not sent him. I have not sent him because I keep thinking there is a thing I could say to you that the law cannot say.” He looked at the water lapping the bottom step. “But I have run out of it. So I will just tell you the truth, which is that this water does not care what either one of us believes. It does not care about your wife’s grave or your grandfather’s chimney or your right to your own ground. It is a machine I helped build and it is doing what a machine does and it will be at your door Thursday whether the marshals come or not, and if you are standing in that door it will drown you, Mr. Tipton, the same as it is drowning the fence, with no more notice and no more mercy. I have brought a boat. I am asking you to get in it. That is the whole of what I came to say.”

Absalom looked at this tired young man who believed the dam was deliverance and was decent enough to be ashamed of what deliverance cost. “You build a thing that drowns the dead,” he said, “and you call it mercy.”

“I do,” Frame said. “God help me, I do call it that. There is hollows in these mountains where the children die of the typhoid every summer from the water they drink, and there is families farm a hillside their whole lives and never see a dollar nor a light bulb nor a doctor, and this dam is going to give them clean water and current and work, and I believe that, Mr. Tipton, I believe it the way you believe your Bible. And I am still ashamed. A man can do a thing he believes is right and be ashamed of the price of it. I did not used to know that. I know it now. I learned it up this hollow.” He set the papers down on the porch rail, under a stone, weighted against the still air, and put his hat back on. “The boat will be at the camp landing. I will leave a man with it through tomorrow. After that I have to send the marshals or answer to Knoxville why I did not, and I am not man enough to lose my job over you, I will tell you that plain too. Tomorrow, Mr. Tipton.” He climbed back down into the boat, and the men took up the oars, and they slid away over the drowned pasture, over the place where the mule used to graze, growing small against the gray sheet of the slackwater,

and Absalom watched them go and did not touch the papers.

It was Cora who came last, in the dark, and Cora who undid him, though she did not raise her voice once.

She came up the same drowning road her brother had come up, on foot, with a lantern, and she did not come onto the porch. She stood at the foot of the steps with the black water two feet behind her, lapping at the heels of her boots, and she held the lantern up so he could see her face, and he could see in it her mother — he had always been able to see Verlie in her, in the set of the jaw and the gray eyes and the white scar at the eyebrow that he knew, that he had always known, was no childhood fall — and he stood in the door and looked down at his daughter and the water beyond her, and neither of them said anything for a long time.

“I am not going to argue you,” she said at last, the same thing Dewey had said, and he understood they had agreed on it, had decided between them not to push, and somehow that was worse than pushing. “Dewey tried. Frame tried. I will not. You are a grown man and it is your ground and your death if you want it.” She lowered the lantern a little. “I came to tell you what I am going to do, so you can choose with all of it in front of you. They take Mama tomorrow. First light. I have left her for last on purpose, because I could not stand to think of her going up the mountain alone, and I wanted —” Her voice caught, the first crack in it. “I wanted you to be standing on dry ground when she did. I wanted her to be carried up by her own people and not by strangers in a boat after the marshals have hauled you off drowning. That is all. She lay beside you forty years and beside that boy fifteen, the boy she covered with our own dead baby’s name because she could not bear for him to lie unmourned under a lie, she turned the lie into a kindness, that was your Verlie, that was who she was —” She was weeping now and did not wipe it. “And tomorrow she goes up the mountain. And I am asking you whether you want to carry your own wife to her grave, with your own broken hands, on dry land, like a man — or whether you want to drown on this porch holding ground that was never the thing you loved. It was never the ground, Daddy. You did not love the dirt. You loved her, and you loved us, and you have spent fifteen years confusing the ground she is in with

the woman herself, the same as I confused my maps with the truth, the same as Dewey confused his guilt with his courage. We are all of us the same fool in different clothes." She set the lantern down on the bottom step, at the very edge of the water, and stepped back from it. "She is not in the ground. You taught me that yourself, out of that Bible, before I ever left here. *To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.* You believed it for everybody but yourself. Come carry her up the mountain, Daddy. Or stay and drown. But do not tell me you are staying for her, because she is not here, she is wherever you taught me the dead go, and it is not under this water."

And she turned and walked back down the drowning road with the dark coming up behind her, and left the lantern burning on the bottom step, at the edge of the slackwater, for him to find his own way down by, if he chose to.

Absalom Tipton stood in the door a long time.

The water made no sound at all. That was the thing he could not get used to, the silence of it, where the river's voice had been. He looked back into the dark house, at the cold hearth, at the corner where Verlie had sat with her quilting and sung the old songs under her breath, the songs that were gone now, that had gone into the ground with her or up out of it, he could no longer tell which. He thought about the night at the ford, the wet rocks and the boy's jaw under his fist and his own hand breaking and the high water taking what the four of them — him and Dewey and Cora and the river — had made between them. He thought he had been guarding that grave for fifteen years. He understood, standing in the door with his ruined hand on the frame, that the grave had been guarding him, giving him a thing to refuse, a stone to be, so he would not have to be a man who had lost his wife and let his son believe himself a killer and watched his daughter run a thousand miles from a thing none of them could outrun.

The lantern burned on the bottom step. Beyond it the water was black and still and climbing.

He went in and got his coat, and his hat, and his Bible, and he took the photograph of Verlie off the wall, the only one there was, and he wrapped it in a shirt so the glass would not break, and he

banked nothing, for there was nothing left to bank, and he blew out no lamp, for he had lit none. He went out onto the porch and pulled the door to behind him, and did not lock it, for there was no longer anything a lock was for. He went down the steps to where his daughter's lantern stood at the edge of the slackwater, and he picked it up, and he held it high, and he started up the drowning road on foot toward the high ground, an old man with a broken hand carrying a light through the dark to go and bury his wife in the morning on dry land, like a man, with his own people, before the water had her too.

Chapter Twenty-Six — Sawmill Ridge

The new cemetery on Sawmill Ridge stood on a bald shoulder of the mountain above the line, and from it, on the morning of the reburials, you could see the whole drowning of Cane Hollow laid out below like a map of itself.

Cora stood at the edge of the cleared ground with her cutting tools rolled in canvas under her arm and looked down at it, because she could not help looking, because it was the last time the hollow would be a shape a person could read. The water had taken the lower fields entire. The church stood to its windows in slackwater, the steeple naked of its bell, and the schoolhouse was only a dark square foundation now with the water at its sill. The river that was no longer a river lay over all of it flat and pewter-gray and patient, the same color it had been the September morning she drove up the wrecked road with a transit on the seat and told herself a place was only a set of distances. She had drawn that place. She had measured every corner of it and reduced it to linen and ink, and she had believed, God help her, that the drawing would keep her safe from it. Now the place was going under her drawing the way it went under the water, and she stood on high ground and understood at last that the map had never been the thing. The map was only a way of saying *this was here*, and there were better ways, and she had come up the mountain to do one of them.

They had carried Verlie up at first light, and Absalom had carried his end.

That was the thing Cora would keep. Her father had come up the drowning road in the night with her lantern, and in the morning he had stood at the new grave with his hat off and his broken hand

holding his end of the box, and they had let her mother down into Sawmill ground with her husband's hands on the rope, on dry land, by her own people, the bell — rehung now in a raw new frame of poplar that smelled of sap — ringing once over her the way it had rung over every Tipton burial for fifty years. Absalom had not wept. He had stood with his ruined hand open at his side and his face like the side of the mountain and watched the dirt go in, and when it was done he had put on his hat and walked off a little way and stood looking down at the drowned hollow, and Cora had let him be. There would be no more words from him about the ground. He had given it up the only way a man like him could, which was wordlessly and entire, and she would not shame the cost of it by remarking on it.

Dewey had stood across the open grave from her while they let their mother down, and at the last, when the box settled and the ropes went slack and Ruth turned the children's faces away, he had looked up and caught Cora's eye across the hole in the ground, and something had passed between them that did not need a word and would not have survived one. They had buried their mother together. It was the first thing the two of them had done together since they were children at the ford, and Cora understood, watching her brother's jaw work as he paid out the rope, that this was how it would mend between them if it mended at all — not in talk, of which they had no gift, but in the slow ordinary labor of standing on the same side of the same grief and doing the work with their hands. Lonnie had cried, and Dewey had drawn the boy in against his leg, and Pearl had held the baby, and they were a family burying their dead, which was a thing the hollow had not let them be in fifteen years, and the water taking everything below had given it back to them in the taking.

And then there was the other grave, beside Verlie's, where they had set the box that had come up out of the Tipton plot under a baby's name — and the matter of the stone.

Ila Greer had come up the mountain.

Cora had not been sure she would. After the locket, after the telling — and the telling of it to Ila had been the hardest hour of Cora's life, harder than the ford, harder than anything, sitting

in that falling house below the red and putting into a broken old woman's hands the truth of where her son had lain for fifteen years and how he came to lie there and under whose name — after all that, Cora had not known whether Ila could bear to stand on the ridge and watch the box go in the ground at last. But she had come. She had come in her black that she had worn fifteen years for a son the valley said had run off, and she had her boy's fiddle in its case held against her chest like a child, and she had stood at the grave dry-eyed and terrible and present, finally, fully, in her grief, a grief that the valley had called madness because it had been right and no one could stand to credit it. *He is by the water, waiting on me.* She had said it for fifteen years and they had humored her, and she had been exactly, unbearably right.

Now she stood beside Cora at the edge of the cleared ground while the men finished the grave, and she watched the hollow drown, and she said: "You are to cut the stone."

"If you will let me," Cora said. "It is yours to say. All of it is yours to say."

Ila was quiet a long moment. The fiddle case rose and fell against her with her breathing. "There is them that say cut the truth," she said. "That he was murdered. That it was your daddy's hand and your brother's hand and —" she turned her terrible dry eyes on Cora " — and a girl's hand with a creek rock, that I have heard tell of too, now it is all come out. There is them say cut all of it in the stone, the whole black truth of it, so the valley cannot ever again call me mad nor call him run off, so it stands in granite over the water where God and everybody can read what was done to my boy." She looked back down at the hollow. "I wanted that. I will not lie to you. There was fifteen years I would have cut it with my own hands and made you all watch."

Cora said nothing. It was Ila's to say, and Cora had learned, too late and at great cost, when to hold still and let a thing be read true by the person it belonged to.

"But I have got him back," Ila said, "and I find I do not want his stone to be about the worst thing that ever happened. I have spent fifteen years where the worst thing that ever happened was the only thing about him there was. I am done with it. I want

—” Her voice went, and came back. “He played the fiddle, Cora. Did you know that? Of course you knew it, you loved him, God help you, you were a child and you loved him before he turned. He played the fiddle so it would make you cry at a dance, that boy, before the whiskey and the debt and the meanness got in him. He was nineteen. He did a terrible thing to a girl and worse was done to him and the river took the whole sorry tangle of it, and that is true, and I will not have it carved in a stone for strangers to read over my dead boy a hundred years from now when they fish over this water.” She pressed the fiddle case tighter. “Cut his name. His own name, that he never got to have in the ground — fifteen years under a baby that was not him. Cut *Asa Greer*. Cut the years, the true ones, that he was born and that he died. And then —” She stopped, and looked at Cora’s hands, the rolled canvas, the careful ink-stained fingers. “I am not a lettered woman. I do not have the words for a stone. You are the one has the words and the hand both. So you cut what is true, child, only not the black of it — not the murder, not the rock, not whose fist. The valley can dig the black of it out of the paper if it wants to. Leave that in the paper and the paper under the water. On the stone you cut the true thing that is not the worst thing. I will trust you to know the one from the other. God knows you have learned the difference the hard way, same as me.” She looked once more at the drowned church below. “Some things you carry up the mountain. Some things you let the water keep. I have decided which is which. Cut his name, and cut it true, and the rest I leave to you.”

So Cora knelt at the stone.

She had thought, kneeling, of all the lettering she had cut in her life, and how nearly all of it had been a kind of hiding. The false stone she had once helped her father imagine, fifteen years gone, when a fresh grave had to be made to read as an old one — *Asa Tipton, 1880* — though it had been a county mason cut that, not her, she had only been a child watching and learning the lesson that letters could lie. The forged plat in the field office, where she had drawn this very grave as *unmarked, relocate to common ground*, every penstroke a small clean falsehood meant to route the diggers wide and keep the water’s secret. A whole career of careful hands,

of precision turned to concealment, of being so very good at making a line read true that no one would think to ask whether it was. She had told herself it was preservation. She had told herself a map was an act of love. And it had been, in its crooked way — but it had been love that hid, love that measured its distance, love that would do anything for the people it loved except stand in front of them with nothing held back.

It was good gray granite, the best she had been able to get from the camp, squared and faced, and she had her tools rolled in the canvas — the lettering chisels and the dummy mallet, the fine ones she used to use for the false stones, the careful blades she had once used to make a forged plat read true, the same hands, the same precision, the lettering she had learned so she could hide things in plain sight on a drawing where no man could find them. She knelt at the stone with the whole hollow drowning below her and her father standing apart and her brother come up now with Ruth and the children, and Reverend Buckles led by the arm to the graveside because he could not see to find it, and Ila standing over her with the fiddle, and Cora set the chisel to the stone and cut.

She cut it true. She cut it the way she had never let herself cut anything, with nothing hidden in the strokes and nothing held back, the letters deep and clean and meant to last past all of them, past the water, past the people who would forget. She cut the name first, the name he had never been let to keep in the ground, and under it the years, the true ones, that he was born and that he died — the boy's whole nineteen summers fixed at last between two honest numbers. And then she stopped, the chisel resting on the stone, with one line left to cut and the line not yet chosen.

She had carried two of them down the mountain in her head. *He played the fiddle* — Ila's own word for him, the boy before the whiskey, the boy who could make you cry at a dance; and Cora had nearly cut it, had set the chisel to begin the *H*, because it was true and because it was kind. But her hand would not start the letter. It was a true thing, but it was a small true thing, a thing for the living to remember the boy by, and she understood, kneeling there with the whole hollow drowning below her, that she had not knelt at this stone to record how a boy had been loved. She had knelt to

undo fifteen years of a lie laid in the ground. The stone was not for the dance. It was for the water, and for what the water had finally given up.

So she moved the chisel down, and cut the last line steady and sure, the words coming up out of her as if they had been waiting in her hand the whole long way down the laurel, until the stone read, whole and plain:

Asa Greer 1902–1921 Borne up out of the water. Known.

She had not asked Ila. She cut that last line without asking, and when she had cut it she looked up, afraid, the chisel still in her hand, to see whether she had overstepped — whether she had once again, even here, even now, made a stone say a thing it was not given to her to say. But Ila Greer was looking at the words with the tears finally come, fifteen years of them, running down into the black collar of her dress, and she nodded, once, slow, the way a person nods at a thing they have known a long time and only now heard said aloud. “Borne up out of the water,” she said, under her breath, as if she were learning it by heart. “That is it. That is what was done to him, and what was undone.” And she put her hand on Cora’s shoulder, the hand that had held the fiddle, and left it there, so that the last strokes were cut with the dead boy’s mother’s hand on her, and the stone, when it was done, was the truest thing Cora Tipton had ever made.

They set it at the head of the grave. Buckles spoke the words over it from memory, his ruined eyes turned up toward a steeple that was not there, and Ila opened the fiddle case and did not play it — could not, had never learned — but held it out, and after a moment Junior Sealy, who had come up to drive the markers and had stood at the back of the small crowd in his too-big coat, came forward red to the ears and took it, because everyone had forgotten or never known that the Sealy boy could play a little, and he tuned it shaky in the cold and played one slow old tune over the grave and the drowning valley, a tune Verlie had sung, Cora realized, one of the old songs, and the sound of it went out thin and true over the slackwater where the church drowned, and it was not much, and it was everything that would be carried up the mountain that the water could not have.

Afterward, when the others had started down, Absalom came and stood by Cora at the new stone. He looked at it a long time with his hat in his broken hand.

"You cut a true line," he said. It was, from him, the whole of forgiveness and the whole of pride and the whole of grief, and she knew it for all three.

"I learned it here," Cora said. "Before I ever left. I just had it pointed the wrong way a long while."

Her father nodded. He looked down at the hollow one last time, at the place where his ground was, under the water now or soon to be, where his grandfather's chimney stood drowning and his fence ran down into the slack and stopped. Then he turned his back on it, deliberately, the way she had never seen him turn his back on anything, and he put his hat on, and he started up toward the living, toward Dewey and Ruth and the children and the raw new poplar bell frame and the rest of his days on poor-draining ground above the line.

Cora stayed a moment more at the stone. The lettering was clean and deep and would weather slow. *Borne up out of the water. Known.* She put her ink-stained fingers in the cut of the letters, feeling the truth of them, the first thing she had ever made that hid nothing, and below her the water lay still and gray over everything she had measured, neither rising now nor falling, holding at the slack, the way water holds when it cannot yet tell which way the world will go. Then she rolled her tools in the canvas and went up the mountain after her father, toward the people standing on the high ground, and left the drowned hollow to keep what it would keep.

Chapter Twenty-Seven —

The Gates Close

They closed the gates of Coldwater Dam at noon on the first of December, and Cora, who had spent fifteen years putting distances between herself and the sound a river makes, heard the Pigeonroost stop.

She was up on Sawmill Ridge when it happened, standing in the new cemetery among the boxed dead, and she did not hear it the way she had thought she would — not a roar, not a slamming, nothing a body could point to and name. The men down at the dam threw no lever she could see. There was only the dynamo hum that had lived in the valley all autumn, the sound of the powerhouse warming, and then a change in it, a deepening, the way a hymn changes when the bass voices come in under the melody. And after the change a silence began to gather in the bottom of the hollow that had not been there before. It took her a moment to understand it. It was the silence of water that had stopped going anywhere. All her life the Pigeonroost had been a sound you forgot because it never quit — the long shoulder of it against the gravel bars, the small talk of it in the shallows, the voice the valley kept even in its sleep. Now, three miles up from the gates, the river was being told to be still, and it was, by inches, obeying.

Junior stood beside her with his cap in his hands. He had taken it off without being told. He was twenty-two and he had driven the red stakes into his own family's ground and he had carried more coffins up this mountain in the last month than most men carry in a life, and he stood there bareheaded in the cold with the dirt of the last grave still on his knees, listening to the river quit, and he said, very low, "There it goes."

"There it goes," Cora said.

She looked out over the rail of the ridge and watched it begin. You could not see water rising the way you could see a flood come — there was no brown wall, no fury. The slackwater did not charge. It crept. It found the lowest places first the way water always had, the old sloughs and the wagon ruts and the cellar holes of the burned-out houses, and it filled them and lay flat and bright and waited and then found the next low place, patient as Scripture, and Cora understood that this was the cruelty of it, that it would take the hollow not in one violence she could brace against but in a thousand small risings she would have to stand and watch. The lower fields were already gone. Dewey's bottom, where the corn shocks had leaned their tents at frost — gone, a sheet of pewter now with the tops of the fence posts standing out of it in a drowned straight line, the only thing left to say a man had once measured that ground and called it his.

And around the whole of it, around the climbing edge of the new water, ran the red. The contour. One thousand and sixty-eight feet above a sea none of these people had ever seen. She had spent the autumn watching her own line on the linen come true in the worst possible way, the red band she and Junior had painted up every doorpost and fence rail in Cane Hollow rising now to meet the actual water, so that for a few strange hours that afternoon you could stand on the ridge and see the lake reaching up toward the painted mark like a tide coming in to a line drawn in the sand, and where the two met there would be no more line and no more sand, only the shore. She had drawn the death of the valley in India ink on linen drafting cloth, every corner true, and now the valley was reading her drawing back to her, aloud, in water.

Behind her the new graves stood in their rows. They had finished the reburials in a hard week of work, the disinterred dead come up the mountain in their numbered boxes, and the diggers had set them deep in the good high ground that drained poor and would be there. Verlie was up here now, moved at last from the ground Absalom had refused for so long to let her leave. And beside her, under the only stone on the ridge that Cora's own hand had cut, lay the bones that had come out of the coffin marked *Asa*

Tipton, 1880 — the bones of a nineteen-year-old with a fracture above the temple. They had come up with a brass locket folded in among them, small and green with the long burial, the initials C.T. scratched inside it by a girl's nail in the summer of 1921; but the locket was not in the ground now. It was down the mountain in Ila Greer's hand, where Cora had put it. The proof had done its work. The stone was cut and set and the boy was under his own name at last. That much was done. But there was a thing not done, a thing no stone could do for her, and she had known since before dawn that today, the day the river stopped, was the day she would have to do it.

She found Junior's eyes. "I am going down to the ford," she said.

He looked at her, and looked at the climbing water, and she watched him want to tell her it was not safe, and watched him decide not to, because he was from here and he understood that some things a person had to walk down to.

"The road is under, past the church," he said instead. "You will have to go on the ridge path and come down by the laurel."

"I know the way."

"I know you do." He turned his cap in his hands. "You want me to come?"

"No," she said, and then, because he had earned more than that, "No, Junior. This is one I have to do by myself. But I thank you."

She went down off Sawmill Ridge by the laurel path, the same path her feet had known at fourteen, and the knowing was still in them. Her mind had filed the hollow flat for fifteen years and her feet had kept the truth of it, every root and stone, and they carried her down through the cold woods toward the river while her mind ran ahead, afraid. Below her through the bare trees she could see the new lake spreading, silver and still, lying over the fields like something poured. The church was already standing in water to its sills, the Cane Hollow Free Will Baptist with its bell taken down and carried off and its windows dark, and the water had come up the churchyard slope to the foot of Burnt Ridge where the graves had been, and the open holes the diggers had left were filling, dark squares going to mirrors, and Cora looked away from them.

The ford, when she came down to it, was not the ford anymore. The two big creek-stones she had crossed on a thousand times as a child, the flat one and the slanted one, were under. The gravel bar was under. The willows that had held the bank all her life stood now with their feet in the lake, their lower branches trailing in water that did not move, did not even seem to breathe, and Cora stopped at the edge of it where the laurel gave out and stood looking at the place where a boy had gone in and not come up.

The slackwater had reached it. That was the thing. The river was neither flowing nor flooding now. It had stopped being the Pigeonroost and had not yet become the lake; it hung in between — the slack moment of a tide when the water neither rises nor falls and you cannot tell, looking at it, which way the whole world is about to go. She had read of it once, in a borrowed book in Cincinnati, the slack between the ebb and the flood, and had thought even then that she had been living in such a slack her whole life, neither going back nor going on. And here it was in front of her, made of water. The ford lay flat and gray and perfectly still, the low sun on it, and it did not flow downhill toward the dam and it did not climb the bank toward her; it simply held, and waited, the way she had held and waited for fifteen years.

She had spent those fifteen years mapping water from the bank. Reading its level by smell. Drawing its edges in ink so she would never have to feel its cold. She had stood on the safe ground above every river the government had given her and she had measured, and measured, and the measuring had been a kind of religion, the one she had built to replace the one she lost on this spot, and the whole of its doctrine had been: *do not go in*. You could know a thing entirely from the bank. You could hold it still and read it true and never once let it touch you.

She bent and unlaced her boots.

She did it without deciding to, the way her feet had known the path, and she set the boots on a dry stone and peeled off her wool socks and rolled her trouser legs to the knee, and the cold came up off the water at her bare shins before she had even moved, December cold, the kind that does not warn you, and she stood there at the brink of the slackwater with her drafting hands hanging at her sides

— her true hands, her steady hands, the hands she had built a life around so that nothing would ever again make them shake — and she stepped in.

The cold took her breath. It went up her legs like a struck nerve and her whole body cried out to come back, and she did not come back. She took another step, and the bottom was the bottom she remembered, the round stones and the silt between them, the give of the ford that had not changed in fifteen years though everything above it had drowned, and she went on, slow, into the still water, until it stood at her knees and then above them, soaking the rolled wool dark, and she stopped where she judged the deep of the old channel had been, where the high water had run that July, where Asa Greer had gone down. The lake held her without moving. There was no current to fight. It was the strangest thing she had ever felt, standing waist-near in a river that had stopped being a river, the slackwater closing around her warm-cold and absolutely still, neither pushing her nor pulling her, only holding, only waiting to see what she would do.

For the first time in her life she was in the water she had spent fifteen years drawing from the bank.

“I struck you,” she said.

She said it to the water, in a voice she did not recognize, and the saying of it broke something loose in her chest that had been set in plaster since she was fourteen.

“You had hold of me and you were hurting me and I was so afraid, and there was a stone in my hand, the creek stone, and I struck you here —” her own hand came up, wet, and touched her temple, the white scar above her left eyebrow that she told people was from a childhood fall — “I struck you here to make you let go, and you let go, and you staggered, and I have believed every day of my life since that it was my stone that started you toward the dark. I have believed I killed you. Fourteen years old and I have carried it like it was mine to carry, the whole of it, and I never told one living soul, not the county, not the preacher, not my own — I let them say it was a drowning. I let Daddy tell me to hush about what you did to me, and I hushed, and I have been hushing ever since, and I built a whole life out of hushing and called it a profession.”

The water held still. Down the hollow the dynamo hummed its deepened note. A last light lay on the surface around her, broken into long bars by the drowned willows.

"But it was not only my stone," she said, and this was the harder thing, the thing the autumn had taught her, the thing that had come out grave by grave and confession by confession until it stood plain. "It was my stone, and then Dewey's fists, and then Daddy's hand — Daddy's right hand, that has never closed since, that broke on your jaw and that he let everybody think was a farming hurt — and then the high water that you and Dewey had been running whiskey across all that summer like it was nothing, like the river was a thing that owed you. We all of us put a hand to it, Asa. And none of us did it alone, and the river finished what we started, and there is no one I can hand the whole weight to, not Daddy, not Dewey, not myself, though God knows we have each of us spent fifteen years trying to take it whole so the others would not have to. I see it now. I had to draw the whole valley to see it. It was shared, every bit of it, and at the bottom of it, under all our hands, it was the water's."

She was crying now, finally, the way she had not let herself cry in fifteen years, not at her mother's grave, not anywhere, the tears coming down into the still water that had taken the boy and would take the church and the store and the school and the fields and the very ground her father stood on, and would give back none of it, and would keep its silence the way Dewey had said it would, the way she had wanted it to.

"I gave you the locket," she said. "Before any of it. Before you turned mean. I scratched my letters in it with a pin and I gave it to you down here because I thought — I was fourteen, I thought you were the whole of the world. And you took it into the ground with you under another boy's name, my mother's lost baby's name, because she could not bear for any child to lie nameless and so she gave you the one name she had left over to give. There was mercy in it, Asa. I did not used to be able to see the mercy for the lie. I can see it now."

She stood in the slackwater until the cold was past hurting, until her legs had gone from pain to a far-off aching to nothing much at

all, and the light went off the water, and the first stars came out over the drowning hollow, hard and white. And somewhere in there the speaking finished itself and a different thing began, quiet, with no words to it, that she could only have called release if she had had to name it, though it did not feel like release. It felt like setting down a thing she had carried so long she had stopped knowing it was heavy, and the strangeness of her own arms without it.

She had come to the water to confess to a dead boy. She found, standing in it, that she was speaking past him — to her father up on the ridge in his cold house, refusing to the last to leave; to her mother in the new high ground; to Dewey already half gone down the mountain to a life that would let him sleep; and, most of all, in the end, to the fourteen-year-old girl who had run up this bank with a stone still wet in her fist and her whole life ahead of her bent crooked by one July night, the girl who had decided, climbing in the dark, that she would get so far away and learn to hold things so still that the river could never reach her again. *You can come down off the bank now*, Cora told that girl. *You can come down into the water. It is only water. It was always only water, and it was never only water, and both of those are true, and you are allowed to stop measuring the distance.*

When she came out, the slackwater closed behind her without a mark, flat and gray and waiting, and she could not have said, looking at it in the last light, whether it was about to rise or to fall. She knew now that you never could. That was what the slack meant. You stood in it not knowing, and you chose anyway which way you would face, and you walked out, and the water did whatever the water was going to do.

She sat on the dry stone and pulled her wool socks over her dead-cold feet and laced her boots with hands that did not shake, and not because she had made them stop. They simply did not shake. She went up the laurel path in the dark with the river gone still below her and the new lake rising one patient inch at a time toward the red line she had drawn, and at the head of the path she stopped once and looked back, and the ford was already gone under, indistinguishable now from the rest of the spreading water, no two stones, no willows' feet, nothing to mark the place but what she

carried, which she found, for the first time, she was able to carry without it crushing her — the way a person carries a name, or a love, or the exact elevation of a grave.

Chapter Twenty-Eight — Slackwater

The lake came to full pool by the middle of the following spring, and in June, when Cora drove out of the mountains for the last time, Cane Hollow had been under water for half a year and looked as though it always had been.

She had stayed through the winter to finish the work — there was always more work, the maps to be made final and filed, the last of the relocation parcels to certify, the new shoreline to be surveyed where the old contour had been, for the lake had its own banks now and the government wanted them drawn. Through that whole gray winter the stone on Sawmill Ridge had stood at the head of Asa Greer's grave where she had cut it, that morning of the reburials, kneeling at the raw clay with her chisels and her drafting precision, the same exactness she had once used to keep the world at arm's length turned now, at last, to telling it true. *Asa Greer*, she had cut. *1902–1921*. And below it, because the truth was larger than a name and dates, and because she had finally understood what a stone was for: *Borne up out of the water. Known*. She had thought a long time, kneeling there, about that last word. She had nearly cut *Forgiven*, and had not, because forgiveness was a thing the living did and could not promise on stone for the dead, and *Loved*, and had not, because it was true but it was hers and not the valley's to read. *Known* was what she could swear to. He was known now. The lie was out of the ground and the boy was in it under his own name, and his mother had stood at the reburial in a black dress gone green at the seams and had not wept and had not raved, had only said, looking at the box going down into the high dry ground, *I told you all. I told you he was by the water*, and it

had not been madness, it had never been madness, and everyone standing there had finally heard it as the plain true thing it was.

Ila had consented in the end. That had been the hardest mercy of the whole autumn and Cora did not think she would ever stop being marked by it — the afternoon in the falling house below the red when she had told Asa's mother the truth, all of it, her stone and Dewey's fists and Absalom's hand and the river, and had laid the green locket in the old woman's lap and watched her close her fingers over it. Ila had not forgiven them. She had done something harder and stranger; she had said, after a long time, *He was cruel at the end. I always knew it and I never could say it. You are the first one ever told me a true thing about my boy*, and she had let them move him, on the condition that the new grave be high enough to stay dry, that her boy who had spent fifteen years by the water be put at last where the water could not reach. And Cora had drawn that grave herself, had surveyed its elevation with her own level rod — eleven hundred and forty feet, seventy-two feet above the line, above the red, above any rising the dam would ever make — and had written it in the field book in her small upright hand, and the writing of it had not steadied her by turning grief into a column. It had simply been true, and the truth had been enough, which was a thing she had not known a number could be.

Her father had not come to the reburial. Absalom had stayed on his ridge through the standoff and the rising, refusing the marshals and the money and his own children, until the backwater stood at the foot of his porch steps and there was nothing left below him but lake, and only then, when the choice was finally between the ground and the people standing on it, had he come down — carried out, very nearly, his broken right hand useless on Dewey's shoulder, his good hand white on the porch rail he would not let go of until the last. He lived now in the relocation house on Sawmill Ridge, above his wife's new grave, a smaller meaner house than the one he had lost, and Cora had gone to see him in the spring and they had sat on the porch and not said a great deal, which was its own kind of saying. At the end of the visit he had looked out toward where the hollow had been, where the lake lay flat and bright between the ridges, and he had said, *I always thought it was the worst thing a*

man could do, to let his ground go under. And then, after a while, *I was wrong about which thing was the ground.* It was as near as Absalom Tipton would ever come to telling her he was glad she had told it true, and she had taken it, and it had been enough. That was the lesson of the whole bitter autumn, she thought, driving out: that enough was a thing you could learn to recognize, and that she had spent her life unable to, always measuring the gap between what she had and what would have made her safe, and that the gap had closed not because she finally got the rest but because she finally set down the ruler.

The road out climbed the same grade it always had, only paved now, smooth, a state highway built to carry the tourists who would come, the government men said, to fish the new lake and admire the dam. Near the top, where the road crested the ridge before it dropped away toward Knoxville and the rest of her life, there was an overlook, a wide graveled pull-off with a low stone wall, and a sign the state had put up that said COLDWATER LAKE and gave the surface acreage and the depth at the dam and the date the gates had closed, the whole drowned valley reduced to a column of figures on a board, and Cora, who had spent her life making exactly such reductions, pulled the truck over and got out.

She had a new posting. A reservoir down in Alabama, another river being stopped, another valley of people to be measured and moved, and she had not been sure, when Wendell offered it, that she could do it again — that she could go back to the work of erasure now that she knew the names under the stones. But Wendell, who had seen her forge a federal record and had chosen the woman over the machine and had somehow kept them both, had said a thing she carried with her. *Somebody is going to draw these valleys, Cora. It might as well be somebody who knows what is in them.* Hands that knew the names. Junior had said it first, a green boy outside a commissary, and it had frightened her then because she had crossed half a country to keep from feeling it, and now it was the reason she was going on. She would map the next valley true. She would get the names right on the stones. It was not nothing. It was, she had come to think, very nearly everything a person could do — to set down truly what was about to be lost, so that the losing was at

least a known thing and not a vanishing.

She walked to the stone wall and looked out over the lake.

It lay below her, enormous, still, the slackwater come to its full and final pool, filling the hollow ridge to ridge, blue under the June sky where it had been pewter under December's. A long sheet of it, miles of it, lying over the church and the store and the school and the fields and the ford, over the cellar holes and the wagon ruts and the gravel bars, over the whole of the world she had been born into. Out near the middle two men sat in a johnboat, not moving, their lines down in the water, and Cora understood with a small interior lurch that they were fishing directly over the drowned church, that the steeple was somewhere down in the green dark below their hull, that they did not know it and never would, that to them it was only good still water over a deep hole where the big fish lay. She watched the boat ride the flat surface and she did not begrudge them. The valley was a lake now. That was the truth of it, and she had learned to take the truth of things. What survived had never been the land. The land was gone, every acre of it, drowned past recovering. What survived was up on Sawmill Ridge in the high dry ground, in the cut stones with the right names on them at last, in an old woman with a green locket and a true word finally said to her, in a broken-handed man who had learned which thing was the ground, in a girl grown to a woman who had walked into the water and come back out and stopped measuring the distance to safety because she had finally arrived at it. None of that was on the map. None of that would ever go under.

And there along the edge of the lake, all around it, ran the line.

She saw it and her breath caught, because she had drawn it and had let herself forget it would be there — the contour, one thousand and sixty-eight feet, the red she had painted up every doorpost in the doomed hollow, the taking line. Only it was not red now, and not painted. It was the shoreline. The lake had risen to meet the mark exactly, as she had known all autumn it would, and where the water stopped was where her line had been, so that the whole vast still pool lay bounded, ridge to ridge and mile to mile, by the elevation she had inked on linen in a cold camp office the autumn before. Her line had become the edge of the water. The thing

she had drawn to mark for death had become, simply, the shore — the place where the lake ended and the living ground began, where the new houses stood and the new graves above them, where the road she was about to drive went on out of the mountains toward whatever came next.

And standing at the wall she found she was holding three things at once, and could not have said when she had picked them up. The red line, become the shore: the measure she had made for drowning, turned without her leave into the plain edge of the world, water on one hand and the living on the other. The locket, brass gone green, that she had scratched her girl's initials into with a pin and given to a boy in this water and that had come up out of it fifteen years on to be the one stubborn true thing no lie could swallow — laid now in an old woman's lap above the line, where the water would never have it. And the slack tide itself, the water below her gone past rising, past falling, holding at the full — only still now, only done. Three points, and the shape they made between them sprang up complete, the way a thing you have surveyed your whole life from three sides will of a sudden stand whole in front of you, and you see that the measuring was only ever a way of loving it from a safe distance, and that you are not at a safe distance anymore.

The lake did not flow and it did not flood. It had come to slack and stayed there, the way no living tide ever could, held at the full by the gates three miles down — a slackwater that would never turn. And Cora Tipton stood at the overlook above it in the June light and looked at a great body of water, and for the first time in her life she did not measure it. The numbers rose in her out of long habit — the level, the acreage, the depth at the dam, the state's figures she could have corrected on the sign behind her — and she let them go, let them sink and settle the way everything else had sunk, down into the green dark where the church was. She only looked. She let the lake be a lake and not a problem to be solved, let it be beautiful and terrible and full and finished, and she stood there longer than she needed to — not because she could not leave it, but because, at last, she could.

Then she went back to the truck, and started it, and drove on out of the mountains, down the smooth new road toward the next

valley and the next stopped river and the names she would get right there too. And behind her the slackwater lay still in the bowl of the drowned hollow, bounded by her line, keeping its dead and its silence under the moving blue, neither rising now nor falling, the river gone quietly on being a lake — and not flowing, and not flooding, and shining.