

LEE, CODY, M.F.A. *The Sexton*. (2017)
Directed by Michael F. Parker. 80pp.

The following thesis is an excerpt from a novel in progress submitted as partial requirement for The Master's in Fine Arts degree at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. When a flooded river washes away ten graves in a county cemetery in central Texas, the county sexton is tasked with recovering the missing caskets. Aided by a troubled teenaged girl who has requested to complete her community service sentence in the graveyard in effort to be near her deceased brother, the two embark on a journey through a rich and devastated landscape that will leave them changed forever. Told in alternating points of view, the novel explores the issues of grief, memory, and identity while detailing the history and landscape of the Texas hill country.

THE SEXTON

by

Cody Lee

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2017

Approved by

Committee Chair

©2017 Cody Lee

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Cody Lee has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
I.....	1
II.....	19
III.....	36
IV.....	48
V.....	63

CHAPTER I

On the eighth day, when the rain began to subside and the water began to lower, the Sexton trudged out to the edge of the cemetery hill and saw five caskets exhumed by the river. The shaft from his flashlight sliced through the air, lighting the rain drops like a swarm of tiny comets falling to the wet earth. There was no sun, only bruised and livid storm clouds. He shined his light down on the altered landscape where the floodwaters had shorn away a portion of the cemetery hill. The river—normally clear enough to see the sun perch, the largemouth bass, and occasional can of Lone Star beer—was a swollen torrent, the color of a scab.

Three caskets sat by the water's edge, about thirty or forty feet directly below him. He raised his light and saw another had banked on the opposite shore, run up on the river's edge like a canoe. He brought the light down into the water and counted a fifth pointed skyward in the center of the flume, caught on some unseen tangle beneath the surface. It leaned in the current, threatened to fall and be swept away. He clicked his flashlight. The wet darkness closed around the beam like the black maw of a catfish around a worm.

These were not all.

Barro County Cemetery was surrounded by water on three sides: the north, the east, and the south. The Sexton had begun his evaluation of the flood's damage in the Old

Cemetery on the north side, where the water had first begun eroding the land. From there he marched east and counted one, two, three missing headstones in a newer lot. Nearly six hours of manual labor to dig each of those graves, another hour to set the stone, and countless days, spent keeping the lot clean, free of litter, free of weeds, of Chinese wisteria, dandelions, of poison oak, free of the vulgar graffiti left by young boys. He scanned the banks and the water, but did not see anything. Unlike in the Old Cemetery, the residents here were buried in newer, lighter caskets. The river would have carried them farther.

He crossed Amity drive, the road that split the cemetery in half, and stepped onto the southern side, the side he'd spent the first decade of his career restoring. No sexton before him had done such extensive work here, ridding the lots of weeds and updating the records, documenting the names, all the names—Ramirez, Lopez, Garcia, Montoya, Hernandez. He passed his father's headstone and the cypress grove and walked out to the southernmost tip of his cemetery where he counted two missing graves.

His light skimmed the gloomy water. Those buried here on the southern side resided in coffins. Small, lightweight boxes made of pine or cedar held shut with iron screws. Iron rusted. Pine and cedar floated.

He held up his hands to add up the damaged graves. How perfect. A casket for every finger, a coffin for each callused thumb. Ten worn and blistered fingers. Ten destroyed graves. Ten missing to recover. Ten to reinter.

When he got back to his house on the west side of the cemetery, the phone was ringing. He had not received a phone call in over three weeks and that last call had only been an insurance salesman asking what would happen to his family if he had an accident, a man his age needed to plan for these kinds of things. "I don't have a family," he confessed and that ended the conversation.

He picked the phone up and cleared his throat. He hadn't spoken more than a handful of words aloud since the flooding began. A side-effect of living alone and in a place that commands silence like a cemetery.

It was Sheriff Tomlin.

"I'm out here with Emergency Cleanup. You won't believe what washed up in this lady's yard. It's the damndest thing I've ever seen."

In his haste to answer the phone, the Sexton forgot to remove his boots. A trail of muddy footprints ran from the porch, across the wood floor of his living room, across the yellowed linoleum of his kitchen, and right up to the phone.

"I think I have an idea what it might be. Where are you?"

"Pecan Street, not far from the river crossing. You'll have to go through town. Water's still over the road but you can't miss us. Trust me."

Ten minutes later, the Sexton pulled onto Pecan Street. Three white pick-up trucks with yellow flashers had pulled over to the side of the road in front of one of the neighborhood homes. The Sexton saw the Sheriff's car and parked behind it. He pulled his poncho over his head. An Emergency Cleanup crewman stepped out from behind the house and motioned for him to come to the backyard. As he came around the house he

saw Sheriff Tomlin speaking to an elderly woman on the back porch. She wore a bright blue muumuu and looked to be about ninety-three years old, hunched over a walker with tennis ball feet.

“Ma’am I need you to calm down,” the sheriff said. “We’ll get it outta here soon as possible. Look here comes the man himself.” Sheriff Tomlin pushed past a group of crewmen towards the Sexton.

“Did it break open?” asked the Sexton.

“Doesn’t look like it, but Mrs. Jameson here is about to have a conniption. Called the station saying a body had washed up in her yard. Here I am thinking it was one that had recently been alive.”

The sheriff put his hand on the Sexton’s shoulder and walked him past the ring of crewmen towards the casket. The river had washed the woman’s back fence away and her yard looked like it was melting into the flume. The casket sat near the water’s edge like a banked canoe. The crewmen had put a ring of orange cones around it like a crime scene. At least they had done that. The Sexton kneeled beside it. Cherry-wood with steel trimming. This was a newer casket, interred in the last decade or so. He ran his fingers along the wood. A thin coat of slime but otherwise it had remained intact.

“Never in all my life have I seen it come up like that,” the woman said. “It came up with a vengeance, I tell you. I could hear the water rising in the night. Bringing the dead right out of the ground. Right to my yard.”

The Sheriff turned to the Sexton.

“What the hell happened up there, Roberto?”

“The flood,” he said. “The water eroded part of the cemetery hill. It washed several graves away.”

“How many?”

“Ten in all, I believe.”

“Christ almighty.”

“I located one in the river this morning and I know where five of the others are. But I don’t think I can recover them all myself.”

“Jesus, Roberto. You didn’t try and put up sandbags or something?”

“Sandbags?” the Sexton felt the fire spread from his chest and his throat to the front of his skull. “I’ve been pushing City Council for years to reinforce the bank--”

“You need to get that out of my yard and back in the ground!” Mrs. Jameson slammed her walker on the wooden step of the porch.

“We’re working on it, Mrs. Jameson,” the Sheriff said.

“She’s right,” said the Sexton. “We need to get them all reinterred. Have Emergency Cleanup bring this one back to the cemetery. I will make a place to put it. They can help me get the others and then can we begin looking for the missing ones.”

The Sheriff removed his hat, punched the inside three times and placed it back on his head.

“Look, Roberto, half the town is still without power and three more people were reported missing this morning bringing the total up to something like sixteen. There are road closures everywhere. I can’t afford to send out a search party for a buncha damn

coffins. I'll have 'em load this one up for you but we got bigger things here. I want to help you, I do, but I need all the help I can get right now."

"Just a few men. That's all I need."

"Roberto," said the sheriff, "The cemetery is gonna have to wait for now."

Sheriff Tomlin turned and ordered the crewmen to help the Sexton load up the casket and then drove off, leaving the Sexton standing in the rain.

"Come on," one of the crewmen said, patting the Sexton's shoulder. "You heard him. We got a lot to take care of. Let's get this thing loaded up."

The Sexton nodded. They carried the casket to his truck and he covered it with a tarp to prevent it from getting wet. Only after he had gotten in his truck did it register how asinine this was. He did not start his truck. He pulled an antacid tablet out from his pocket and placed it on his tongue. His throat was so dry it hurt to swallow. He watched the rain gather on his windshield. For years, he'd warned City Council, those bastards, that if nothing was done the river would eventually rise and cut into the cemetery. Historical maps had shown the river had shifted course considerably in the past century. With every flood, it crept closer and closer. The crude drawings of the first cemetery map showed it nearly a hundred yards out from the cemetery hill. By the turn of the century, the emerald waters ran just twenty feet from the fences of the outermost lots. Avulsed. That was the word for the phenomenon. Nasty sounding, like a type of muscle spasm. He'd discovered the term in *The Layman's Guide to the Geography of Central Texas and Adjacent Areas* at the Barro County Library.

The river had avulsed. And now the cemetery, his cemetery, had been destroyed.

When he'd taken the job thirty-something years ago—to think it had been that long—the previous sexton, a crusty German descendent with liver spots on his scalp, had warned him, “They’ll act all gung-ho about keeping everything together. It’s a lovely thing to think about. Preserving the past. But they’re like children with a puppy and don’t realize it’s work evergoddamnday. Get used to caring for it all yourself and if something goes wrong, it’s your ass’s fault far as they’re concerned. And I’ll be perfectly blunt, no disrespect or anything, but we ain’t ever had a Mexican run this cemetery before.”

“I have as much German in me as I do Mexican,” he told the old man. “You knew my mother.”

“Yeah. But you’re smart enough to know people don’t hardly see things for what they are.”

Despite his many warnings, City Council had not seen the danger his cemetery was in.

Sandbags!

He started his truck and drove back to the cemetery.

The flooding had started when Monica, a category four hurricane, struck the coast of Texas ten days ago. He wondered if meteorologists gave storms these benign names in hopes to diminish their impact. Regardless, Monica landed and dumped over a years’ worth of rainfall in just three days. The Sexton listened to the deluge on his tin roof and wandered out only once to see that the cemetery fence had been swallowed by the river. But unlike most storms, Monica did not let up. She brought with her several other swells,

all coming in rapid succession and for four more days, they endured steady rainfall until nearly fifty-four inches of rain had fallen and two acres of Barro County Cemetery had been devoured.

His Ford Ranger bounced up the hill amid the freshly scoured potholes. He grimaced as he downshifted and the casket bounced in the truckbed.

The Barro County Cemetery was founded in 1849. The cemetery itself was a peninsula, surrounded on all three sides by the river's crystal waters. Rendered on a map, the grounds looked like an egg laid on its side, an ovular plot of St. Augustine and rose gardens, ringed by cypress and oak trees. The cemetery road ran through the center of the grounds and the two hemispheres, northern and southern, were as distinct as the left and right brain. On the north side, all the German born citizens were buried, on the south the Hispanics. This division had endured through the years, though nothing forbid a cross over, so to speak. A German man could request to be buried on the south side and a Hispanic woman could be interred on the north if she desired. However, the sentimental wish to be buried alongside family members had ensured the cemetery's original segregation.

The closest the two halves came to merging was the eastern tip, where only the wrought iron fence of the Old Cemetery separated them. This region, the northeastern tip, had received the brunt of the damage. A simple matter of gravity really. Of course, the northern edge would be struck first and hardest by the raging waters as they flowed south towards the Gulf of Mexico.

In the dim light of his house, he took out a labeled grid map of the cemetery and drew a red U-curve to mark the path he'd walked earlier; where the river had cut through the cemetery. A good sexton knows his cemetery. By simply looking at the map he could trace his footsteps with a nearly compulsive precision. He marked the ten graves and wrote the names of the missing out so he could report it to his boss, Councilmember Edward Faust. Among other things he proved too incompetent for, such as waterworks, sanitation, and park and plazas, Faust oversaw the city's cemetery.

Somehow things only became worse as he put them into writing. The graves of two of the city's most historically significant figures, Wilhelm Mecklenberg-Strelitz and Friedhelm Wolfe-Moeller III, had been destroyed. In any other circumstance, the city would fire the sexton who let those graves fall to ruin. Surely they'd understand he'd had no control over Monica and her brutal winds. Tomlin's words echoed in his mind. He pushed his pen so hard in the paper it snapped and leaked ink on his hands. It took him five minutes to find another.

He continued compiling the list. One of the newer caskets belonged to a young man named Caleb Taft. A very recent burial, a soldier who'd taken his own life in the line of duty. The papers had run story after story about it a few months ago, even after the family had asked to be left alone. God help him. At some point, he'd have to tell the mother her son had become part of another sensational story—the graves that had gone missing in the flood. Then there was Agnes Faust. Another from the Old Cemetery. He did not allow himself the hope that there was no relation between her and Councilmember Faust. In a town this small, the branches often grew upwards and

intertwined, rarely branching outwards. And of course, there were the two from the southern side, those anonymous weights that had sunk him with such force now had names; Alejandro Espinoza and Lorena Lucia Alvarado.

City Council would not be happy to know that a good portion of the Old Cemetery had been damaged. If he told them, they would, no doubt, send him a crew to help him restore the northern side of the cemetery. But they would not care about the southern side. They would end the search as soon as the Old Cemetery and the area around was restored. He could hear Faust now, “Well, it’s a matter of costs, really. It’s unfortunate, but you understand. I know you understand.” And he, the Sexton, would swallow his anger as he always had and say, “Yessir, it’s unfortunate, but I understand.”

After eight minutes of staring at the phone and arguing with himself, he found the resolve to call his superior. Faust answered on the second ring.

“Sexton Hummel, what is it? This better be important.”

“It’s the cemetery, sir. It’s taken extensive damage. Many graves have been washed away.”

“Washed away?”

“Yessir. Gone. We’ll need to recover the caskets.”

“Do you know which graves? Do you have the names yet?”

“No,” he said, and felt blood rush towards his face. He’d never been a good liar, but Faust had never been a good listener. “Not yet. There’s no way to tell.”

“Hmmm. Well this could be a problem. This will be very upsetting to the families, I’m sure.”

“Your fears are the same as mine. I’ve located a few of the caskets and recovered one in town, but I’m going to need help. That’s why I’m calling.” He chose his words carefully. “I believe I can reclaim them all, but only if you send me some help, an Emergency Cleanup Crew. Once we have them all, we can begin contacting the families. Discuss reinternment options. Avoid any unnecessary conflicts. It won’t look good on either of us if we can’t recover them all.”

He closed his eyes, hoping the brief silence meant Faust had been persuaded.

The Councilmember sucked air through his teeth. “Mr. Hummel, you know I respect you. You know I think you’ve done excellent work out there, but right now things are far worse elsewhere. Waterlines are busted. More and more people are reported missing daily. We’re stretched so thin. We’ve had to call in retired policemen. We’ve got every reserve fireman helping out. We’re this close—and I hate to even mention it aloud—to asking for Federal aid.”

“Just three men. That’s all I need. What about the Eagle Scouts?”

“They’re helping move the seniors at the assisted living home.”

“Junior League? Elk’s Lodge?”

“At the civic center feeding flood victims and down at the town square helping clear the roads, respectively.” A long silence ensued. “It’s bad. Real bad.”

“And it will only get worse if you don’t send me help. I can’t recover these caskets on my own.”

Faust sighed, like a parent acquiescing to a child’s demands. “I’ll see what I can do.”

The Sexton hung up and went out to the precipice again. A hot bubble of guilt and anger swelled in his chest, rose into his throat, and ruptured in a gassy burp. Anger at Faust, who would have no doubt sent help had he known he had a personal stake in the matter, and guilt that he had not named the dead. He should have said their names. A good sexton would have said their names. A good sexton cares for the dead without distinction. A good sexton would save the few, rather than risk losing them all.

He stared at the casket that had been caught in the center of the river. It was small. Not like the jumbo casket that had washed ashore in Mrs. Jameson's yard. A child's or a woman's perhaps. He felt an opening in his chest, like a vulture spreading its wings. Water broke around the little casket in a v-shaped jet-stream. It was a matter of time before the water carried it away.

He was a good sexton. He would not watch another be carried away, even if it belonged to Agnes Faust. He pulled an antacid tablet from his pocket, placed it on his tongue.

The rowboat leaned against the backside of the cemetery garage beneath a blue tarp. The previous sexton had kept it here to take fishing. When the Sexton flipped the boat, cave crickets and wolf spiders scattered under the rain. He lifted the boat onto his back and carried out to his truck like a squat turtle, treading slowly in the mud. The sound of the rain was muted and distant beneath the hull of the boat. A spider fell on his shoulder and scurried down his arm. Even through his poncho he felt its octave tread and the hairs on the back of his neck lifted. When he got to the truck he patted himself down,

brushing away all unwanted arachnids. He loaded the boat in the bed of his truck, then tiled back to his release the tension in his lower back. His poor back. So many years bent over digging graves, planting trees, uprooting weeds, carrying bags of soil.

Just upriver, near the entrance to the cemetery, he pulled his truck into a small city park. The water had risen a good thirty feet or so feet, completely submerging the few picnic tables and barbecue pits. Just two weeks ago, Memorial Day weekend, the park was full of screaming children, mothers and fathers drinking beer, little dogs chasing tennis balls. All of this underwater now. God have mercy.

He unloaded the boat and drug it to the water's edge. He coiled a length of polypro rope and strapped his life vest on. He said a quick prayer asking God and the Virgin to watch him, and then apologized to his mother. "Forgive me, Mother, but I must go in the river." He did not take the time to explain to his poor mother's soul the very unique and dire circumstances that had forced him to into the river but assured he was wearing his life vest and would use the utmost caution. He pushed the boat into the water and rowed through the murk. He rowed under the crossbeams of the park's swing set and the current pulled the him along. The little boat rocked in the surge and he looked back to see his truck on sweet, solid ground disappearing swiftly in the distance. The boat began to turn sideways. He rowed backwards, his shoulder joints grinding. Keep the boat straight. Keep the boat straight. He pushed the visions of himself tipping over, falling forever into the flume from his mind and continued rowing backwards. Rowing backwards and going forwards. Picnics underwater. Caskets emerging from the ground and landing in old ladies' yards. "God have mercy," he said aloud this time.

The casket in the river had yet to tip over. He knew he'd have one only chance to catch it. The current was too strong to turn the boat around should he miss. For good measure, he tightened his safety vest again then grabbed his rope. He paddled hard towards his left, towards the casket but the current pulled him away. He dropped the paddle. With a silent swish, it slid into the water, gone. He crossed himself and lunged nearly out of the boat. His hand caught the pallbearer arm. He opened his eyes. His body was stretched like a board over the water, his hands clutching the casket arm and his toes hooked the side of the boat, keeping it from slipping away. He floated just above the surface. Like Christ, perhaps. No. Forgive him. Christ walked on water. the Sexton could not even swim.

He closed his eyes. He had his life vest. He had his life vest. Should he fall. He would not drown. He would not drown.

With a loud grunt, he pulled his legs in, pulled the boat closer, until it knocked against the casket and he sat back down. The casket shifted. Whatever it had caught on giving way. With one hand, he reached into the hull and grabbed his rope. He lassoed the casket. Given its size, he thought he could hoist it aboard so long as he could pull it free. With a generous tug, he loosed it from its snare. It sank first and his boat tipped to the side. He leaned back pulling the rope up, hand over hand, the friction searing his palms. Gloves! How could he have forgotten gloves? He reached the end of the rope and had the nose of the casket out of the water but his boat had nearly come flipped. He would capsize and go down with this casket. Down into the roaring river to become just another one of the missing persons in this flood. A body to be found days later in another county

downstream, bloated and water-logged, clutching onto a dead child's casket. With a final hoist, he pulled the casket aboard and fell back into the boat. The rowboat righted itself, smacking onto the water. It rocked back and forth like a cradle. the Sexton groaned. He was certain he had pulled something in his back. Above him the sky had not changed. Far as he could see just gray and black. Water reached his ears. He sat up. Something had punctured the boat's ancient hull. He began paddling, left side then right, the pain in his back suddenly gone for the time being. What an amazing thing, the body, he thought, able to accrue such arbitrary aches and pains only to forget them in life-threatening moments such as this.

The current was too strong to row back towards the park so he banked the skiff on the muddy slopes of the cemetery hill about a hundred yards downriver. Several gallons of water filled the bottom. He hoisted the casket out. His back sent a jolt through him, reminding him he was alive.

The casket had not taken extensive damage. A few chips here and there but this was high quality wood, a dark oak with copper plating. This was no Alvarado or Espinoza. He pulled it a few yards ashore, but left it for now. With his hand in the small of his back he walked up the muddy slope towards the cemetery and his house. By the time he had made it back it was dark. He'd walk back to get his truck in the morning he decided.

In the kitchen, he took three ibuprofens and microwaved a bag of rice to place on his back. The phone began ringing as he watched his rice bag turn in the microwave.

“Sexton Hummel.”

“Councilmember Faust.”

“I’ve got good news: I’ve found you some help. You’ll have it first thing tomorrow morning. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it earlier.”

“Yes. Yes. Go on.”

“The community program for troubled teens. My brother-in-law, Eugene Morris, he’s the counselor at the high-school, he oversees the program. Typically, he sends them to me and I have them clean up the parks. Trash duty, you know. Things teenagers can handle.”

The Sexton pressed the rice bag into his bag and groaned with relief. Why hadn’t he thought of it either? Bless Faust. Bless the stupid man. Community Building and Enterprises for Troubled Teens and Young Adults, a community service organization for at-risk teenagers. Not the best option, but, yes, it could work. Of course, in the past all he’d ever had them do before was pick up litter. Maybe scrape some graffiti off a stone with a toothbrush. This would be a more demanding projecting, but typically the young men they sent to the Sexton were energetic. They needed things to tire them out, to keep them occupied and out of trouble. Idle hands.

“She’s a young girl who needs to finish up her sentence.”

“Girl?”

“Yes. She’s fifteen.”

The Sexton rubbed his head, knocking his hat onto the floor. Damn Faust, the stupid man. “You realize the kind of work I need done here, don’t you? This is difficult labor.”

“Mr. Hummel, I’m doing the best I can. I’m trying to help you out here. Eugene disapproved at first, but I pushed him. He said he needed to talk to the girl first. He did, and he changed his mind.”

“What made him change his mind?” The Sexton could supply many reasons a counselor might disapprove. A sixty-year-old man. A fifteen-year-old girl. Rigorous manual labor. Dangerous labor. He’d love to hear what could possibly change the man’s mind.

“Well, this is where things get interesting.”

“Really now?”

“Yes.”

“The girl says she wants to work in the cemetery.”

The Sexton scratched his head. Faust continued:

“Obviously, her options were rather limited and she needs to finish her sentence up soon so that influenced her decision. If she doesn’t complete her hours she can’t return to school and will be sent to a juvenile correctional facility. I’ll have Eugene give you a call and fill you in, but here’s the rundown. Quite recently she’s been causing a lot of trouble at the school. Promiscuous behavior, threatening other students, that kind of thing. She was nearly expelled and sent off to a reformatory school, but Eugene convinced the school board to give her another chance. He really believes in this child and doesn’t want to see her sent away. The best thing for her right now would be given the chance for a normal childhood.”

“I see,” said the Sexton, though he didn’t, not really.

“Yes,” said Faust. “Her family has been through so much lately. I’m sure you’ve seen it in the papers—the stories about the soldier who killed himself, Caleb Taft. It’s his sister. Eugene thinks this could be an important step in her grieving. Acceptance.”

The Sexton let go of his rice bag. It slipped limply from the chair and plunked onto the linoleum floor.

“Ah yes,” he said. “Acceptance.

CHAPTER II

Caroline Taft sat in the back seat of the police car while Counselor Morris talked on and on about how awful everything looked. The police officer driving the car simply nodded, occasionally rolling a toothpick between his teeth. It really did look like awful. Like that time a few years ago when Caleb parked his truck in the yard and accidentally ruptured the septic tank. Shit water shot out of the earth like Old Faithful. That's about what it looked like out there; like the world's septic tank had ruptured and spewed up all over Barro County.

"Look at that," Counselor Morris said. "Can you even believe it?"

What Counselor Morris was looking at was a dead bloated cow in the parking lot of Walgreens.

"Well, Caroline, I don't think you'll have any problems finishing your hours now. In a way, I guess this storm was a blessing."

"A blessing," repeated the police officer. He looked at Morris and flicked his toothpick with his tongue.

Morris sighed. "All I'm saying is it'd be a shame to see a young lady's life ruined over a disagreement at school."

Young lady. Morris was lucky there was a cop sitting next to him or she might pull the knife from her boot and go for the jugular. Or better yet, reach around, grab one

of those stupid tortoiseshell pens he kept in his pocket, and put it through his windpipe. Only reason she was being treated this way was because she was a girl. They expelled her brother, Caleb, for getting in a fight. They had no problems doing it either. Boom, he was out. Had to join the military just so he'd be able to go to college. But they'd just hate to see something like that happen to a young lady. She reached down and checked her boot, made sure the knife was still there. It insulted her that the cop didn't even pat her down.

Morris turned in his seat to look at her. She snapped up.

"My foot itches," she said, but he didn't even notice.

"I don't know what all Sexton Hummel has planned for you," he said. "Typically, when I send kids from the program to the cemetery, they just pick up litter or help remove graffiti, but I want you to remember there are other options. If you don't want to be out there anymore, I know there are parts of the city that could use the help. Okay?"

There it was again, that same tone he used when he said, "young lady."

"Caroline, I'm talking to you. Answer me, please."

She did not answer him please.

She'd been seeing Morris every week since Caleb died. The school thought it would be best he talk to her. They strongly encouraged, which was a nice way of saying forced, her to sit in his office during lunch on Wednesdays to talk. Being fifteen is hard enough, they said, even when you don't have a brother who blew his own brains out on his second tour in Iraq. Everyone just wanted to make sure she was doing fine. It was okay if she wasn't.

It was Morris who had persuaded the principal not to expel her when she got caught with the knife at school. Zero-tolerance policy. No weapons on school grounds. “When a student brings a deadly weapon to school, we have to assume he...or she, means harm,” said the principal. So that was that. They were kicking her out. Sending her out to Gladstone Reformatory in Amarillo. But then here came Eugene Morris to the rescue. Probably thinking he was making a real difference too. Somehow, he’d convinced them that she was a special case, that she wasn’t dangerous, just going through some hard times. Sending her away would only cause more problems. What she needed, he had said, was a normal childhood.

After some deliberation, the school board consented to Morris’ plea so long as Caroline served the community service sentence. So for three weeks she scrubbed bathroom stalls in the county parks with a foam brush. Then the flood hit and the whole town shut down. Her work was put on hold, until yesterday when Morris called to say there were three areas in particular that needed help: Leyton Park, the Barro Arboretum, and the Barro County Cemetery, where Caleb had been buried about a month ago. She answered without even thinking.

“Cemetery.”

Morris asked if she was sure. Was she sure she wanted to be there with everything that had happened recently? Her mother said no. Her father said no. Hearing them say it like that was game over. She was sure.

The police car drove through the town square and then crossed the river. The water, normally forty or fifty feet below, was well over the banks. The roofs of the riverside houses looked like slanted, stationary rafts.

“Caroline? Caroline?” repeated Morris. She had still not answered his question.

“I think she can hear you,” said the police officer.

“Just nod, please. I know a lot is going through your head right now, I know you’ve been through a lot, but I need you to tell me you understand. If you find you’re uncomfortable working in the cemetery we can move you back to the parks.”

Been through a lot. That was Morris’ way of referring to Caleb’s suicide and the newspaper articles. The whole town talked about it. Offering their opinions on why he’d done it. Why that boy had taken his own life.

She nodded.

“Thank you,” said Morris. He faced the front. The car turned onto Amity Drive and pulled through the cemetery gates. Row after row of headstone rolled by. They looked like teeth growing out of the ground. Some stained and crooked, others chipped and worn. Caleb’s was out there somewhere. Right in that lot beyond the rose garden, way out on the edge by the river.

Her throat tightened as they came closer, her neck tensed. She stared at the seat in front of her. The top of Morris’ balding dome crested the headrest. It was his fault. If he hadn’t have said, “if you get uncomfortable” she wouldn’t even have thought to be. He was always doing that to her. Suggesting to her how she might be feeling and then making her feel that way. She glared at his stupid head. Just above his left ear was a

weird mole the shape of Michigan. Maybe it was just the light, but it looked like that thing was throbbing. Somebody should probably tell him to get it looked at. That somebody would not be her.

They pulled up to the grave-keeper's house.

"Well," said Morris. "Time to meet the man you'll be working for. Can you please do me a favor and take your hood off? Make a good first impression."

"It's raining," she said. "I don't want to get wet."

"I have an umbrella," he said.

All three of them got out of the car, but the police officer just stood by the driver's side chewing on his toothpick. Morris fiddled with his umbrella until it burst open. They walked up to the front of the Sexton's stone house together. Rainwater slid off the tin roof in thick streams. On the porch, Morris folded his umbrella, opened the screen door, then knocked three times. The knob turned and someone opened it from the inside. The door hadn't even been locked.

Caroline had never seen the Sexton, but she'd heard stories about him before. Boys at school dared each other to spend the night in the cemetery and a few claimed to have encountered and escaped him. They called him the grave-keeper. Said he'd chased them out wielding a shovel, a machete, a chain saw. The stories were never consistent and the grave-keeper's arsenal became deadlier with every retelling. Supposedly he was ancient. Somewhere between eighty and a hundred depending on who you talked to. His wife died years ago, obviously murdered by the man himself, but he kept her body in a double-wide coffin in his house and slept next to it every night. Tanner Burgess claimed

to have seen it himself. Went right up to the grave-keeper's house one night, looked in the window, and saw the old man open up the coffin lid and climb right in wearing his pajamas and everything. Tanner Burgess was full of shit though and everybody knew it. She wasn't afraid of any grave-keeper. Two weeks ago, she'd strapped on rubber gloves and picked up a pink-crusted condom from the Widmann park stalls that clung stubbornly to the tile floor.

“Sexton Hummel.”

“Counselor Morris.”

They shook hands.

“This here is Miss Caroline Taft.”

Morris stepped to the side. When the Sexton looked at her the corners of his eyes creased, his jaw set suddenly. He offered his hand. It was all hard and leathery and strangely cold. She could feel his calluses and the knobby bones beneath them. She was eye-level with him, which just made her feel huge and awkward. He might have been an inch or two taller but that was only because he wore a navy trucker hat that sat on the top of his head. It took her second to realize it was a faded Texas flag on the front. The red had turned pink, the white, yellow. He was probably about her dad's age, maybe a few years older. Hard to tell. But he obviously wasn't anywhere near his eighty. His mustache, which looked one of those nasty caterpillars, all black and fuzzy, wasn't even gray. He was the kind of person who just looked like he'd had a long day, even after he showered and got all cleaned up.

Morris broke the silence. “Like I mentioned on the phone, Miss Taft found herself in a bit of trouble at school. She’s been, well, hanging around older boys.” Which was none of Morris’ damn business and had nothing to do with the matter at hand. “She damaged school property, destroyed another student’s personal belongings, and brought a deadly weapon to school with intent to harm.”

“You can’t prove my intentions,” she said.

“What she did isn’t my concern,” said the Sexton, taking his hand out of hers.

“Yes, well, I just want to make sure we’re clear on everything here. So you know what you’re getting, so to speak.”

Know what he’s getting? Last she checked the Sexton wasn’t adopting her.

Morris continued, “Caroline’s well aware that she is to listen to you and do everything that you ask and that you will report any and all misbehavior. That you are going to keep a log of the hours she works and that she only has three weeks to complete the remaining fifty hours on her service. Right, Caroline?”

He waited for her to respond.

“Good. Well, do you have any questions, Mr. Hummel?”

The Sexton shook his head. “No. I’ve never had any issues with the program in the past. I don’t plan on there being any now.”

“Good,” Morris said. Then he opened his umbrella again and stepped off the porch.

The Sexton looked her up and down. Pervert. She curled her hands in the pockets of her hoodie. The rain ran out of the porch gutter into a tin barrel that was overflowing.

“Well,” said the Sexton. “You’re going to be a great help to me. We really need to get started, but let me show you the house real quick.”

It had to be the saddest house in all of Texas. She didn’t even have to leave the front doorway to get the full tour. No TV in the living room, just a little radio and a record player. No coffin either but that wasn’t really a surprise. Tanner Burgess had probably never even spent the night in the graveyard. The fireplace had a charred log in it and facing the fireplace was a loveseat, a faded yellow color like baby puke. Thrown over the back of the loveseat was a red and black Mexican blanket. On the mantle, there was only one photo. A woman. Judging by the dress she wore and the pose she struck—looking away from the camera and not even smiling—Caroline guessed it was his mother. That or the Sexton really was ancient and his wife had died like fifty years ago.

“Just you here?” she asked.

“Just me.”

He stood there blinking at her for a moment, like he was waiting on her to say something else, then suddenly he seemed to remember he was the one showing her around. He gestured towards the kitchen, which was really just one end of the small house, no wall separating it from the rest. “If you ever need a drink of water, just grab some from the fridge here.”

His fridge looked like something from one of those old antique catalogues, something they might have in one of those tourist shops down by the river, only this one was in use. You had to turn the handle to open, and judging by how he tugged, it looked pretty tough to even do that.

“I’m good,” she said.

“If you ever need to use the bathroom it’s right over there. The one in here is a little nicer than the one out in the garage. Figured you’d probably rather use that one since you...” He didn’t finish his sentence. “Anyways, we should probably head out to the garage, if you’re ready. There’s a lot to do.”

The garage was at least three times the size of his house and given the number of magazines, newspapers, and take-out food boxes from the Taco Haus she gathered he spent more of his time here. She walked around looking at his assortment of tools and weird implements, while he unloaded something from the back of his Ford Ranger. As threatened, there was a bathroom. She flipped the light on. A calendar hung above the toilet. A sultry woman writhing on a golden shore, cupping her enormous tits and biting her lower lip as the foamy ocean licked her legs. Sports Illustrated Swimsuit. 1989. She looked back at him, he was clearing out a spot for her in the passenger seat.

“Don’t go in there. That bathroom’s a mess.”

He ran over and closed the door. She wiped her hands on her knees, regretting touching the knob or anything near this bathroom. Who knows what he did in there.

In addition to his truck, he had two riding lawnmowers. One had three wheels and was propped up on a cinder block. Both had bumpers wrapped in what looked like inner-tubes, the same kind people used to float the river in the summers. She kicked one.

“So they don’t damage the stones if you bump ‘em on accident,” he said, coiling up another rope. “Did they tell you what happened? What it is you’ll be helping me with?”

She shook her head.

“Really?” He threw the rope in the bed of the truck and stood there for a moment, like a thought that needed extra chewing had hit him. “Well, let’s go. It’s probably better if I just show you. You’ll have to see it to believe it.”

His truck was at least fifteen years old and she worried it wouldn’t even make it to the end of the driveway. It was a stick shift, just like Caleb’s truck. Well, her truck once she turned sixteen and got her license. If she could ever learn to drive the stupid thing. Ease off the clutch, her father would say. And she would, but the it just lurched and stalled. She hated that truck. She hated a stick shift. They’d made automatics for a reason. It was the twenty-first century. Besides, her father never even got the dent in the front fixed.

Tejano music crackled through the AM radio and she couldn’t tell when one song began and another ended. She looked at the Sexton. He didn’t exactly look Mexican. Hummel didn’t sound like any Mexican name she knew. Then again, his skin was kind of dark and she’d never seen a white man grow a mustache like that.

“You like this music?” she asked.

“Oh,” he said, as if he hadn’t noticed it was even on. “You can change it if you want.”

She guessed that station hadn’t been changed in years. She left it on. He pulled off the cemetery road and drove across the lawn out towards the river. It looked like the edge of the cemetery had just melted away, fence and all. He turned the truck around it and backed it up to the brink.

“Come have a look,” he said, opening the door. He brought out a heavy Mag-lite and shined it down the edge.

It took Caroline a moment to realize what she was looking at, that those things down there by the water weren't logs or canoes, but caskets. Three of them it looked like.

“We need to bring them back up,” said the Sexton. “With the rain still coming down and the ground so wet, it's only a matter of time before one of 'em slips away.”

“How do you plan on doing that?” she asked.

“I'm not,” he said “You are.”

“You want me to go down there?”

“My back is sore and my knees don't work like they used to. If I go down a slope like that, I'm not coming back up. I need you to do it.”

“Seriously?”

“You can do it,” he said. “I'm going to show you how to tie a hitch-knot. It's very important that you tie it correctly so watch carefully.”

He demonstrated the knot, articulating each fold and loop slowly like she was born stupid, same way her father showed her things at the furniture store, like understanding how to operate the sander was astrophysics.

“And then you pull the loop through like this and give it a tug, make sure it's tight.”

“I can tie a knot,” she said.

“Well, it's not just any knot and it's important you get this one right.”

She peered down the ledge. It was steep and slick, at least a thirty foot drop. Roots and tendrils stuck out of the side like spider legs. The water gurgled and hissed below.

“You seriously expect me to climb down there?”

He looked at her like she’d asked him if water was wet.

“Yes.”

This man was going to kill her. What kind of psychopath wants to work in a graveyard anyways? The perverted kind who likes to watch teenage girls drown in the river, that’s who.

“Here.” He threw a fifty-gallon trash bag at her. No lie. A freaking trash bag.

“Wear that, unless you want to ruin your clothes.”

She unfolded the trash bag to discover it was in fact a plastic poncho. A few cave crickets fell out and bounced away. She pulled it over her head and grimaced. It was musty and rank. Something crawled across her skin near her collarbone. She squealed and slapped herself. The Sexton just watched until she was done.

“Well go on now,” he said, waving at her. “We need to hurry.”

With the rope in one hand, she began the descent, right foot first. The mud smelled awful. The mud, the river, the nasty cricket-filled poncho. Everything had a wet and mossy stink. About halfway down, her heel slipped. She fell on her back and slid a few feet before catching herself on a root.

“You alright?” called the Sexton. His head poked over the edge of the precipice, looking down at her.

The poncho had torn. Mud seeped through and caked her shirt, causing it to cling to her back. She let go of the root and crab-crawled the rest of the way down. By the time she reached the bottom where the caskets were, mud had covered her entire backside and her hands up past her wrists.

“Good,” said the Sexton when she stood up. “Now loop the rope through the handle on the front of that one there.”

She sauntered over to the casket he pointed to. It didn’t look anything like the casket they buried Caleb in, which was just a simple black box with silver handles. This one looked like it’d been in the ground for years and the wood had a marbled look. There was a copper crest about where the person’s chest would be with an inscription in what she assumed was German. She ran her fingers through the grooves.

“Don’t do that. Just tie the knot like I showed you.”

She looped the rope through the handle, then folded it over like he had shown her, then pulled it through the second, new loop, and took the end and...well, she wasn’t quite sure anymore.

“Got it?” the Sexton asked from the top of the hill.

She looked at the tangled mess in her hands. It wasn’t quite what he’d done, but was close enough.

“Got it,” she said.

He disappeared over the edge and a moment later she heard the truck start. The rope grew taut and the casket began to crawl up the slope in a rickety trudge. It looked

like an oversized slug inching its way up a cave wall, leaving a deep, slick groove in the soggy hillside.

She gazed up in the blank sky and along the river banks before she realized that the weird groan she heard was not coming from any living creature, but the wet rope itself. A hideous and strained moan. Then it happened. A whipping motion so violent and quick her eye barely made sense of it. The knot unraveled. Exploded more like, and the casket came skiing back down the slope in a speed that did not, for the life of her, seem possible. Down and down it came, bringing to her mind images of other strange and beautiful disasters that did not seem possible: avalanches mowing down strong pines in the Rockies, tsunamis leveling palms on an Asian shore, jet engines crashing straight into shiny skyscrapers. And yet, before she had time to put what had just happened into words, it was gone. The casket slipped into the brown foam of the flooded river and was gone.

The truck stopped and the Sexton came running out to the edge of the slope.

“What happened?”

“I...I”

“Where is it?”

She looked back to the river.

He cried out. A gurgling sound that would have been funny if he wasn't so angry. He pulled something out of his pocket and put his hand to his mouth and began chewing vigorously. He paced back and forth at the brink's edge like an agitated cat. She went to the water, to where the casket had gone in.

“Don’t go near that water!” he bellowed.

“I can get it,” she hollered. “It’s just right here. It didn’t go anywhere.”

“No! I’m coming down!”

He tested several spots, going back and forth before finding a good foothold. His descent was more of a clamber, and he sidestepped the whole way, one hand on the earth. Though he didn’t slip, he had to stop three or four times to either catch his breath or press his fist into his back. When he finally got to the bottom he was breathing so hard she thought he was going to have a heart attack right there.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Did you tie the knot like I showed you?”

“I thought I did. Look I’m pretty sure it’s just right here in the shallow part.”

“Don’t go near the water!” he demanded, still bent over. Somehow, injured like that, all hunched over, he looked meaner, scarier. Like the kind of man who did sleep next to his dead wife’s body. Had probably killed that wife too. Nobody knew how she died. They called him the Sexton, but he was just a grave-keeper really.

“Go get me the rope,” he said slowly, through gritted teeth. “I’ll tie the knot. We’ll pull these others up and worry about that one later.”

She crawled partways up the slope and grabbed the muddy, dangling rope and brought it to him. He tied his knot around the other casket. Then, without saying a word to her, he tried walking up the slope. Three times he tried to find his footing, and all three times he slipped. On the fourth time fell forward, then rolled over and sat on his ass. He

looked both pathetic and terrifying, like a huge catfish drug out of the water gulping with its huge mouth and flapping its fins, trying to swim through the air.

“You’ll have to go up there and pull it up. I can’t.” He held his keys up. “You can drive, no? Fifteen, you have your learner’s permit, right?”

She nodded before it even registered what she was agreeing to.

“Go on then. Take them,” He jangled the keys.

She took the keys and started up the slope. When she reached the top, he hollered, “Just be sure to ease off the clutch.”

When she got in the truck, she realized she’d muddied up his seat. She got out and took her poncho and hoodie off then got back in. She engaged the clutch and started the truck. She pulled the emergency brake and put her foot on the gas. The engine revved. She let up carefully, easily. The tires began to spin in the mud and she pushed further on the gas. His truck was so much older than Caleb’s, the clutch so worn. She let off more, saw mud spray up in the side-view mirror. The truck’s tail began to wag and she eased off the casket. The truck stalled and died. She started it again, this time gassing it harder. The tires dug themselves deep into the wet earth. She pulled her foot off the clutch and slammed her foot down on the gas. This damn truck was not stalling out on her.

What happened next happened in the space of about two seconds, but much like the casket sliding down the mud, it was a lot to process in such a short time. The truck shot out of the mud and launched forward about thirty feet and spun out of control. She fought the steering wheel, gripped it tight until it was steady, or about as steady as she could manage, but just about then the truck rammed into something and died instantly.

Her head hit the steering wheel and when she looked out the front she realized she'd run right into a grave marker. The front bumper had pushed the marker right of the ground and sent a huge crack down center like a derisive smile. Huge gash marks were left in the cemetery where the tires had spun and spun. The Sexton was hollering from below but she couldn't make out what he was saying.

It was always the damn clutch. Just ease off. Just be easy, Caroline. Easy now. Easy now. That's all everyone ever told her. Just take it easy now. You just need to take it easy. Well there was nothing easy about it, dammit. Nothing easy about anything at all.

Before she knew it, she was running. Running fast as she could from that mess she made. Running through row after row of headstone. She turned and headed towards the edge, where Caleb was buried. Where she'd seen them lower his body just a month ago. She was glad her feet knew where she wanted to go, because her mind was all over the place. Couldn't figure a thing out. Her feet suddenly stopped. Run out of places to run. Only this was all wrong he was supposed to be here. She closed her eyes and counted her breathing. The way Morris—goddamn him—had told her. Five seconds in, five seconds out. She opened her eyes and looked for her brother's grave, only all she saw was a sheer drop, straight down to the river.

CHAPTER III

The Sexton pressed his right fist into his knotty back and called the girl's name out again. No answer. By the sound of it she'd not only ground the truck's gears and stalled out, but tore the cemetery lawn up. He pressed his left hand into the side of the precipice and lifted himself up. The casket hung from the rope about twenty feet above him. The hitch knot had held.

"Caroline," he called.

Nothing.

He reached out for a root and planted his boots into the mud but could not get a good purchase. He slipped and fell on his back, emitting a gasp the minty flavor of his antacid tablets. Groaning, he rolled over and leaned against the muddy slope and stared into the water. A diamond-backed water snake nosed its way over a tangle of limbs just a few inches from his feet and displayed no fear, knowing deep down in its cold snake heart that this old man was absolutely no threat whatsoever. With smug ease, it slid into the foamy water.

"Bastard," he said to the snake.

Well, this was really something.

He should have told Faust no. No, he couldn't have the girl come work for him. Not only was a young lady unsuited for the demanding work that needed to be done, he had

lied. He knew the names. All the names of the dead. The girl's brother was gone as well as several of the town founders, including a Faust. Yes, a Faust. And no, he couldn't even make this stuff up.

The rain began to fall harder now, collecting on the brim of his hat and falling in fat drops into his lap. If the rain did not stop and he did not find his way out he would drown. He could not swim. A bad way to be in a town with two rivers. Just days ago all of this was underwater. What would his own mother say to him now? Not only was he near the river, that dangerous, father-consuming creature, but stranded, helpless, in a flood zone with an injured back, sore knees, terrible indigestion, and his only hope was a "troubled" teenaged girl.

The mud of the bank seemed to swallow him, grim thoughts and all. He closed his eyes. The water enveloped him, choked him, the filth and mud clogged his nostrils, his searing esophagus, his eyes (he could not see in this water) the pressure of it above causing his scarred eardrums to pop and hiss (he had such bad ears as a child, so many oozy infections) and he could not do it and knew he could not before he even began.

He was going to die so he thought of his father. The man had passed before the Sexton was even born. His mother was unmarried, nineteen and white, the daughter of Albert and Rebecca Hummel. As a child, the circumstances of his birth were kept from him. Sorrow and misguided compassion prevented his mother from confessing the truth, God bless her. Shame ensured his grandparents kept it hidden. God bless them too, he supposed. His mother first "introduced" him to his father in this very cemetery, after his Oma and Opa passed away and were buried on the north side. He was ten. It was spring,

the rose bushes in full bloom and the faint, grape-like scent of the mountain laurel blossoms flavored the breeze. From that moment on the smell of mountain laurel would always remind him of his dead father. His mother led him by the hand to a stone on the souther edge of the cemetery that read: Raul Juan-Carlos Hernandez. 1931-1950.

“There?” he said.

“There,” she said, bending down closer to the stone. “Here.”

“How did he die?”

“He fell into the river.”

“He didn’t try to swim?”

“He tried,” she said. “He tried. But he fell from very far. And he was scared.

There was no one to help him.”

Tears welled in her eyes and she fell back on her rump. She sobbed and looked at him and said, “I’m such a bad mother. I’m so sorry.” He thought he was supposed to cry. He wanted to cry so badly for his mother, to prove to her that she was not a bad mother, that she had taught him right, that he knew a boy was supposed to cry at his father’s grave but he could not, not for this stone, for this man beneath the earth who fell into the river from very far and was scared.

“Don’t go near the water,” his mother said Well, mother, here he was.

“Hey!”

He opened his eyes. The water had not risen, only his anxieties and the painful memories tethered to them. He looked up

“Did you know?”

Caroline's face peered over the edge above him, her hair hanging around her face in darkened dripping strands. She had lost the poncho he'd given her. He blinked and wiped the rain from his eyes.

"Did you know my brother washed away too?"

"Can you help me out?" he asked.

"Answer the question."

"Please, just throw down another rope. I can't climb out on my own."

"You knew, didn't you?"

"Caroline, please."

Her head disappeared. He waited for a rope but none came.

"Caroline."

No answer, but he knew she was still up there. A man who has spent the better part of his life alone knows when another is in his presence.

"I had no idea," he said. "I still don't know who all has washed away."

"That's bullshit."

"Please, just throw me a rope. I didn't tell you because I didn't know what you'd do when I did."

He stared up into the rain hoping for a rope, or an answer, or even her face. Nothing. Just fat drops of rain, unseasonably cold. He lowered himself back into the mud and looked out at the water, all the drops of rain falling helplessly into the current, like a million never-known fathers.

Something landed on his head. He reached up to feel a wet and heavy rope.

“I didn’t mean to hit you, but I ain’t sorry I did,” Caroline said. She extended her long neck far out over the precipice, “It didn’t hurt, did it?”

He shook his head. He took the rope and hoisted himself up with a grunt. He opened his mouth, “Thank you. Now, just to be safe, can you please—”

“I already tied it to the bumper,” she cut him off.

Both hands around the rope, he planted his feet into the mud and began the climb. It felt like someone had taken a hammer to his back and a current of pain ran from just above his waist out the end of his toes. Every time he brought his foot down a bell rung somewhere inside him. When he reached the top, he dropped the rope, stumbled past the girl, and plopped himself down in the driver seat of his truck, the front of which had knocked one Alfred Hitzfelder’s headstone right out of the ground.

He backed the truck away from the headstone and pulled it forward. Caroline stood to back, her arms crossed and her wet T-shirt clinging to her bony frame. In the rearview mirror, he watched the casket tied to the bumper slide over the brink onto the flat land of the cemetery.

“Put that casket in the back of the truck,” he hollered out the window.

“What?”

“You heard me.” He backed the truck up closer so she would not have to drag it far.

“You still need to explain why you didn’t tell me.”

“You still need to explain why Alfred Hitzfelder’s gravestone is out of the ground, why the first casket slipped away, and why you left me down there.”

“I didn’t leave you down there,” she said. “I came back. I just didn’t know—“

“What I was going to do?” he said. He watched her in the side view mirror. “Lift the front end of the casket up and set it on the bed of the truck, then lift the back and slide it in. If an old man like me can do it a young lady like you should have no problem. Untie that knot first.”

She untied the knot.

“Use your legs.”

“I know how to lift things. My parents run a furniture store.”

“Good. Then you should have no problems.”

And she didn’t. The truck rocked as she slid the casket in the back.

“All in?”

“Yeah, it’s in,” she said.

“Good,” he said. “Hold on.”

He put the truck into first and drove off before she could climb out of the bed. She caught herself before falling and glared at him in the rearview mirror. Despite the pain in his back, he drove the truck over the potholes fashioned in the days of rain.

He had her unload the casket with a dolly (she assured him she knew how to use a damn dolly) while he pressed his hot rice bag into his back. He told her to place the casket next to the one Emergency Cleanup had recovered from Mrs. Jameson’s yard the day before, then he made a tally on his grid map. Another from the Old Cemetery recovered, another lost.

“There,” she said. “Now let’s talk about Caleb.”

“We can talk about that when you’re done.”

“Done? I just set it down like you asked.”

He looked up from his map. “Yes, but there are three more like this you need to haul in today.”

“Are you even serious right now? You expect me to do that?”

He set his map down on his workbench. “You see this?” He traced the red line he’d drawn. “This is where the water cut through. It took three graves on the outside of the northern cemetery, including your brothers. These were the first to go. Then an entire portion of the Old Cemetery eroded. Five caskets in all went missing there. We just recovered one.” He paused. “And thanks to you, lost another. Don’t look at me that. Now look, as the water came around the bend, it washed away two more graves, two of the oldest from the southern side.” He pointed to the graves of Espinoza and Alvarado. “The one we just pulled up is from the Old Cemetery.”

“How can you tell?”

“You see how ornate it is? The people buried there could afford caskets like that. Much heavier wood too. This one, however,” he gestured to the other casket, “was discovered in a woman’s yard yesterday. Lift the tarp and you can see the design, the thin steel trim. It has none of the fancy markings like the one we just pulled up. It came from the same lot as your brother’s.”

She lifted the tarp. “Yeah but that’s not his,” she said quietly, almost to herself.

“So what about those others? The ones you need me to get today.”

“They’re also from the Old Cemetery. The rest, including your brothers, are still

missing. We need to get the ones nearby brought in so we can begin looking for the others. The longer we wait, the less likely we are to find them.”

“Does anyone know?”

“The sheriff has been notified. And some city officials.”

“I meant the families of these people. Like do my parents know Caleb washed away?”

“No,” he said. “I was hoping to find them all before—”

“Don’t,” she looked up at him. “Don’t tell them. Okay?” She pulled her jacket over her shoulders and zipped it up. “Look, I’ll help you get those others right now, but you got to promise you won’t say a word to my parents, okay?”

She leaned in awful close to him as though. He couldn’t tell if she was trying to intimidate or implore him.

“Just get in the truck,” he told her.

It took them until nightfall to recover the three caskets. He tied all but the final loop of his hitch-knot and sent her down the slope again with clear instructions on how to complete the knot. Why this had not occurred to him the first time, he could not say, but that is life. The casket across the river and the one on the south bank, near the damaged boat proved relatively easy to recover. When they finished, he went back into his house, reheated his rice bag, and made them both coffee. He brought the mugs out onto his porch where she sat carving something into one of the support beams. She shoved her knife deep into her boot when he came out and pressed her hand against the beam to cover whatever mark she had made there.

“That your deadly weapon?” he asked.

She didn’t answer.

“Here, have some coffee.”

She took the mug and set it down on the porch beside her, but did not take a sip. Unable to sit, he stood over her, pressing the rice bag into his back. The warm sensation spread through him liquidly and lifted the hairs on the back of his neck. A subtle, involuntary groan emanated from his lips. She stared at him out the corners of her eyes, then pulled her hood over her head. Her feet were planted firmly on the top step and her knees came up to her chin. Lunar moths and Dobson flies clinked against the exposed bulbs of his porchlights, their huge fluttering wings creating frantic shadows on the porch. The rain had slowed considerably, but water spilled from the porch gutter into the rusted tin barrel he’d left on the corner. Suddenly, he wondered when he had last urinated.

“Did you need me to take you home or is Eugene Morris coming to get you?”

“Morris was only here to drop me off and get you to sign that paper. I called my mom,” she held up her cellular phone. “She’s on the way.”

“Oh,” he said.

When her mother’s SUV pulled in, the girl stepped off the porch without a word.

“Thank you,” he said as she walked out, her arms crossed around her. “Tomorrow we can begin looking.”

The car turned out of his driveway, the rear lights disappeared over the cemetery hill. He rubbed his hand over the strange mark she’d carved on the porch post then turned

and went inside for the night.

He showered then ate a banana and an egg sandwich, a merciful meal for one with such terrible indigestion. A bit of egg fell from his mustache and fell on his map, which he'd left on the kitchen table. Ten missing caskets. Well, five missing caskets. God help him. The springs of his bed emitted a welcoming moan as he climbed in and reached over to turn his lamp off. The whole bed to himself and still he slept on the right side. Even to him this defied explanation. He had not once drifted over to the left to disturb the non-entity there. That cold, lonely left side of the bed. Occasionally he might outstretch an arm, but oh what he'd give to have someone tell him, Roberto, please stay on your side. He turned over once, twice, three times. A day like this and he could not sleep. Sleep, exactly what his cloudy head and sore body needed, but his sore body and cloudy head was exactly what prevented sleep. Such is life.

He brought the map to his bed and on a pad of paper he wrote down the names of the missing. He made a game of matching the names to the recovered casket using his instincts and experience as the Sexton to educate his guesses. He divided them into three categories. First were those from the Old Cemetery:

Wilhelm Mecklenberg-Strelitz. 1782-1861. The lion engraved oak casket.

RECOVERED FROM WESTERN BANK.

Friedhelm Wolfe-Moeller III. 1791-1856. The copper plated jumbo casket. LOST DURING RECOVERY. STILL MISSING.

Lorelei Bauermann. 1883-1890. The floral-patterned walnut. RECOVERED FROM RIVER.

Ada Kappel. 1874-1913. Gold-plated cherry wood. RECOVERED FROM
EASTERN BANK.

Agnes Faust. 1819-1889. Silver-trimmed oak. RECOVERED FROM EASTERN
BANK.

Then he noted those missing from the western lot:

Alicia Owens: 1963-2004: Cherry wood, steel trim: RECOVERED FROM M.
JAMESON'S YARD.

Caleb Taft: 1987-2005: STILL MISSING

Nathaniel Howardson 1967-2003: MISSING

And finally, he arrived at the two names from the southern lot:

Alejandro Espinoza. 1799-1857: MISSING

Lorena Lucia Alvarado. 1874-1905: MISSING

He said each of their names aloud. Down the list he went mumbling these names to himself like a lullaby and imagining each of their faces smiling back at him. When he said Lorena Lucia's name a ticklish warmth seemed to expand in his chest and spread from his balding scalp down to his callused toes. He said her name aloud three more times; Lorena Lucia, Lorena Lucia, Lorena Lucia rolling off his tongue and filling the damp air of his small, dim house. She died a century ago and she died young. Such a fate fit her name. He imagined she was a stage actor or a dancer. All of the Sexton's favorite actresses died young. He imagined she was beautiful because he imagined that all people once dead and laid to rest were beautiful, even though experience had taught him the contrary was far more likely to be the case. Thirty-one years old. So much younger than

him, but not unheard of. What would the town think? Their Sexton and their starlet together. Would you ever? She was likely buried in a coffin, not some gaudy, plush-lined casket like these old Germans. And she was laid to rest long before these new caskets, sleek and simple, and best of all, affordable became the norm. No, Lorena Lucia was likely encased in something simple but elegant. Pine, or even cedar. A light wood that could have been carried farther than the others.

He folded the paper and slid in the back pocket of his jeans which hung on his bedroom doorknob, then turned his lamp off. He said her name one more time in the dark. "Lorena Lucia." He thought of her coming down step by step off of the stage and into his bed. Her voice soft in his ear and the warmth of her comforting breath. The curve of her body against his and the flush hues of skin against skin and he thought of her until his loneliness had funneled itself to a point and grown swollen and rigid and begged to burst and with its brief, ecstatic release all the anxiety of the day, the searing pain in his throat and chest was forgotten just long enough for him to sleep.

CHAPTER IV

All night she was up with visions of Caleb being swept away by the river. In none of them was he in a casket, and in all of them his body was nearly whole and perfect. The gun wound in his head was still there but it was clean and natural looking and he appeared to be sleeping as he floated away. His dreams ran right out of that hole in his head and mixed with the water and she saw them there in vivid colors, like a movie reflected in the stream, and before she knew it his dreams were really her dreams too. He was leaving. Leaving for good this time. He wasn't coming back to this town at all, but riding that current to some impossibly golden shore to lay his wounded head and he was grinning ear-to-ear. Not that shit-eating grin he had when he was up to no good either, but a blissful, eyes closed grin. The kind you get when you know something good is about to happen you just don't know what and you can't explain how you know it.

In the quiet privacy of her own bed, she was helpless to these fantasies. What was the point of fighting her mind? It knew what it wanted even when she didn't and she was just too tired from moving all those caskets to wonder what it meant. She just closed her eyes and let it go.

Caleb moved through the water effortlessly, like an eel. Or the water moved him. Or they were moving one another. She didn't know. What she did know was that it was beautiful and perfect. So much so that she smiled to herself, eyes closed and all.

When her mother came to get her up around sunrise, to tell her it was time to get ready, she was already out of bed with her rain boots on and one of her brother's knives hidden in each.

On the ride to the graveyard her mother asked what she was going to be doing that day, what the Sexton had planned for her.

"Nothing," she said. "Just cleaning up. The whole place is a mess."

Her mother said she believed it. The whole town was a mess.

The Sexton wasn't in his house so she went out to the garage and found him loading up his truck. He had a brace on his back, the same kind her dad wore when he had to move the heavy pieces at the furniture store.

"Good you're here," he said. "Get in. They found another in town. We've got to go pick it up before we start looking."

She hadn't seen much since the flooding started. Her family lived on the western side of town, up in the hills, further from the river and the only place she'd been was the graveyard. Bad as it had been hit, the rest of the town looked worse. Every other road was blocked. Several times they'd start down one road only to come to a police officer or a group of men in hard hats redirecting them to some other road. Telephone poles were down everywhere. Their long electric lines were severed and frayed and lay across the pavement, as dangerous looking as huge snakes. Trees had fallen on houses and caved the roofs right in, exposing the now broken lives of all the occupants. Weirdest thing was, you didn't hardly see any people other than the police and the hard hats. Right here in the

middle town there was no one to be seen. Normally this time of year you avoided this part of town because it was so jammed packed with tourists and the traffic was awful. Yes, traffic! Even in this town.

The casket they were supposed to retrieve had turned up in the parking lot of the motel on the other side of the rail crossing, just upriver from the Sunny Banks trailer park. The hotel was called The Star Seeds 12, meaning there were twelve rooms. It shared a parking lot with a small strip mall that had a used clothing store, a barbershop, and a pawn shop with a faded yellow sign that said GUNS, TELEVISIONS, STEREOs. “Seedy indeed,” her mother would say any time they passed the hotel. There was always a cop or two around here and always an assault, a robbery, and once every few years, a murder to read about in the paper. Real juicy stuff and nine times out of ten it happened “near the Star Seeds Motel” or the “on the grounds of the Sunny Banks Community.” She guessed there wasn’t much of a community left at Sunny Banks since it literally sat on the banks of the river.

Three men in hard hats were in the lot trying to move a fallen streetlamp out of the way and a Mexican was barking orders in Spanish to some hotel workers. They were pulling out the carpet of the first-floor rooms.

The casket was a dark brown and didn’t have a fancy crest or engraving of any kind. It was mostly in shape, except the left pall-bearer handle was missing. The wood had splintered off where the handle was attached and the flesh beneath was snow white.

“It’s not Caleb’s,” she said. “I’d know his if I saw it.”

“Well, we still need to get it,” said the Sexton. “Can’t just leave it here.”

“I know that,” she spat. “I was just saying. It’s not one of the old ones either, is it?”

“No.” He turned to the group of men in hard hats. “Where was it?”

One of the men pointed towards the other side of the hotel, where the balconies looked out over the river. “Washed up on the side of the hill there.”

“Did you find it like this,” the Sexton pointed to the broken handle.

“We found it on the side of that hill there,” the man repeated.

She wondered why he didn’t just ask if they had broken it themselves if that’s what he was wondering. Then again, the Sexton didn’t seem like the kind of man who would do anything about it if they had.

“Well, let’s get it,” he said to Caroline.

“Sure your back can handle it? Shouldn’t we get them to move it?”

“My back is fine. Come on.”

He squatted down without bending his back at all. The casket wasn’t as heavy as the ones he’d had her move yesterday, but she didn’t realize how sore she was until she lifted it. Luckily they didn’t have to move it all that far.

“You alright?” she asked him, once they slid it into the truck’s bed.

“Fine,” he said, panting. “Fine.”

He put his hands on the sides of the truck and grimaced, trying to stretch out his back.

“Roberto.”

Caroline turned around. Sheriff Tomlin was pulling into the lot with his window

down and another squad car behind him. The Sheriff didn't even park in a spot but just stopped his car and got out.

"Roberto, I always thought you were above the Star Seeds myself," he said pulling his pants up around his waist.

"Looks like they got it right this time and called me first," said the Sexton, forcing a smile. "Unless of course I beat you to it. In which case, let me be the one to tell you the body found here was from my graveyard."

"Naw. I ain't here about any body thank God. But I seen my share these last few days," the Sheriff said grimly. "There've been some break-ins in this area lately." He pointed to the pawn shop. "Place got looted sometime last night. So now I got missing firearms to go with all my missing people. I see you found yourself some help."

"Yes," said the Sexton. "This is Caroline Taft."

She wished she'd gotten in the car. Why hadn't she thought to get in the car the second this asshole pulled up? Her forehead started sweating.

"Miss Taft and I had the pleasure of getting to know each other not too long ago," said Sheriff Tomlin, his thumbs hooked in his belt loops. "She doesn't play too well with others. Takes after her older brother and finds herself in all kinds of trouble, you see. She had a little dispute with another girl and was about ready to take a knife to her. She should probably be heading off to Gladstone, but I'm a nice guy. I believe in second chances."

"That's not what happened," said Caroline.

"So she does speak," said the sheriff, grinning. "Glad to know you can do more

than scowl, Miss Taft. Maybe Counselor Morris was right about you.”

“She’s been a great help so far,” said the Sexton.

“That right? Well, glad to hear it.” The sheriff looked at Caroline. “Miss Taft, you make sure it stays that way, you hear me?” Without waiting for an answer the sheriff turned and headed toward the pawn shop.

She got in the truck while the Sexton shut the tailgate. In the rearview mirror, she saw Sheriff Tomlin turn and call out to the Sexton. They met in the middle of the parking lot and talked for a bit. A lot of nodding. Talking about her probably, but she couldn’t hear a thing.

On the drive back to the cemetery, water started collecting on the windshield. Nothing you could call rain. More like the air itself was just wet. The Sexton turned on his wipers and they squeaked and skidded across the glass. She wondered what all he knew. When Morris had briefed him on the porch he said it was no matter to him what she’d done, but he also said he didn’t tell her about Caleb, because he wasn’t sure what she’d do. He knew something.

“Your name’s Roberto?” she asked.

“Robert,” he said. “But I once looked into changing it.”

“To Roberto?”

“No. To Raul, to honor my father. He was Hispanic. I wanted a Hispanic name. I never ended up changing it though. The sheriff calls me ‘Roberto’ as a joke now.”

“The sheriff is a dick.”

“He’s not a bad man,” said the Sexton. “But he likes to joke.”

“That’s not how it happened.”

“How what happened?”

“The thing at school. When I got arrested. I wasn’t going to hurt anyone. Not really. He makes it sound like I’m dangerous or crazy or something. Like I was trying to kill her or something.”

“Kill who?”

“Just this stupid bitch.”

“Okay. Why did they think you wanted to kill this stupid bitch?”

“They caught me breaking into her locker during gym class. Popped the pins right out of the hinges and took the locker door off. My brother used to do it all the time when he went to school. Stole other kids’ wallets and stuff. But I wasn’t stealing. I just made some alterations to her clothes.”

“Alterations?”

“Yeah. So her clothes fit her personality.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Her name’s Katie Mueller. She’s slept with like every other boy in her school—no joke, she’s literally blown like six different guys on the football team.”

“How old is this girl?” he asked, all concerned.

“My age. Don’t look surprised. She acts all sweet and innocent, but she’s not so I cut some holes in her clothes to reveal the parts of herself she seems to value the most.”

The Sexton scrunched his brow and opened his mouth, about to ask what.

“Oh my god, don’t make me spell it out for you. Her tits and ass,” she said, “I cut

holes where her boobs would be and I made slits in the front and back of her shorts.”

“I get it,” he said, waving his hand. “I get it.”

“I used a knife to do it. One my grandfather gave to my brother. A big one.”

“The one you keep in your boot?” He pointed down to her feet and her forehead grew hot.

“No. That’s a different one. Tomlin took the one I had at school away. I never got it back. He arrested me in front of the whole school and never even gave me the knife back. It wasn’t even mine to lose,” she mumbled.

“They arrested you for cutting up another girl’s clothes?”

“They’ve got it out for me because of all the trouble Caleb got in.” That wasn’t the whole truth, necessarily, but she wasn’t sure if it counted as a lie either since she believed it.

“Well, if you don’t mind my asking: Why? Why’d you do all that?”

“Because she was saying stuff about me.”

“You brought a knife to school and broke into her another girl’s locker because she was saying stuff about you?”

Her eyes grew hot. She knew it was stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid. She knew it then and she knew it now and she sure as hell didn’t need this dirty old grave keeper to tell her she was being stupid. She messed up, okay? She wasn’t thinking straight. She just lost it. Couldn’t take it anymore.

It had happened like this:

Two weeks after Caleb’s funeral, Katie Mueller threw a party for her fifteenth

birthday. Like all the rich ass spoiled kids, she had it at The Island, an eight-acre plot of dry land in the middle of the river complete with a fishing pier, paddleboats, two diving boards, the works. It was only available to members of an elite social class. Basically, Barro County's answer to a country club. Caroline knew the only reason she was invited was out of pity. Can't have the poor girl with the dead brother feeling left out. "I'm not going to that stupid party," Caroline must've said a hundred times that week. "Katie Mueller is a vapid bimbo and I hate everyone that will be there." But when the day came, she put on her swimsuit and told her mom to drive her out to The Island. There was nothing else to do that day.

The party itself was a total dud. Katie and her coterie of skinny, well-developed girlfriends all talked about their new swimsuits and refused to get more than just their feet wet. The boys did can-openers and front flips off the diving board to impress the girls but only ended up exciting one another into a competition of who could withstand the most painful belly flop. For the most part Caroline was an observer not a participant. No one really had much to say to her. What do you say to someone whose brother just blew his brains out while on active duty? Sorry about what happened, did you get some birthday cake? She went to the opposite side of The Island, away from everyone, and waded out into the water. She was floating on her back feeling the sun warm her stomach and face, the minnows nibble at her toes when Eric Morton asked if she was gonna spend the whole party just floating there. Eric was a senior, the only one invited to the party. He was the next boy Katie had her eyes on. Everyone knew that. Katie never shut up about him.

Yeah, she just might float there all day, she told him. He had a line of hair that dove from his navel and down below his waistline.

That was fine, he said, but he knew of a better place, a cove just down river where you could see straight to the bottom, jump from the trees, or just float there all day if you wanted. They could take a paddle boat out to it get away from all these other kids.

Kids he called them. Like both he and her were above the rest of them. Eric Morton wanted to hang out with her and not any of these other kids.

While they paddled out he pointed to the fish below.

“Look a gar,” he said. “A big one too.”

“What?” she said, but she meant to say where, where was this gar?

“A gar. It’s a type of predatory fish. Long and skinny. They stay near the surface and blend in.”

She knew what a gar was, caught one herself once in this very river when her dad took her fishing, but she let him talk about it anyways. He pointed out the sun perch and swore to God that was a cotton mouth moving in the shallows, you could tell by the dark patterns on its back, and when they pulled into the cove and floated in the calm water looking up at the sky above, he pointed to the nest at the top of a cypress tree and said it was probably an osprey’s nest or maybe even a red-shouldered hawk. You could tell because of its size, how high it was up in the tree, and its proximity to the water. Even though it just looked like any old nest to her and she didn’t see a single hawk, red-shouldered or not, she let him talk because it reminded her of the way Caleb talked. How he just knew things and he told her like it was some secret hiding in plain sight.

Something other people, people not like her people, were too stupid to notice. And maybe that's why she did it. Because when Eric talked like that she wasn't thinking about the Caleb that had gone AWOL and killed himself and been buried without honors, but the Caleb that showed her things like how to ease off the clutch and how sometimes, even though their dad said not to, it was easier to just start it in second and ride the clutch just a bit. If you were rolling even just a bit you could skip first altogether. Maybe that's why she kissed Eric Morton right on the mouth, her first time kissing anyone, pushed her tongue against his, let him feel her breasts, reached into his swimsuit and felt him, hard as a one of those cypress roots. Maybe that's why she went with him up onto the shore and into the thick brush of the cove and laid down in the leaves and soft ground, feeling like she was still floating on the water, looking up at that nest and waiting for a huge and magnificent bird, an osprey or a red-shouldered hawk to come light on it.

Everyone had told her that it'd hurt the first time, but it didn't. To tell the truth it was over so fast she felt like it hadn't happened at all. She pulled her swimsuit back on and waded back into the shallows to wash herself off. Way up river she heard all those kids she'd gotten away from yelling and laughing.

When she left the party that evening Katie thanked her for coming and handed her a party-favor bag with a handwritten note that said: I know what you did with Eric. We all do.

Slut. Skank. Whore. These words buzzed around her like yellow jackets and Dobson flies in the school hall. She could swat them away for a bit but eventually they'd land and when they bit it hurt like hell. Boys she'd never talked to before asked her things

like if she spit or swallowed. Katie Mueller made sure the whole school knew. Talked about it like she'd been there and watched the whole thing from that nest. Eric just denied it all. Nothing happened, he said. She was just fifteen. Just a kid. He wouldn't do that with a kid. He wouldn't take advantage of some stupid sophomore. Especially not one who's brother just blew his brains out, man. That's messed up. That's what he said. Or, that's what Caroline had heard he said. She hadn't talked to him. The one time she saw him in the hall she felt like throwing up and ducked into the bathroom until the bell rang.

The breaking point was when Counselor Morris said he was worried about her in counseling that week. He'd heard she'd been engaging in sexual activity. It was like a fork scraping against a plate the way he said it. Engaging in sexual activity. If she didn't want to talk it was fine, he just wanted to make sure she was being safe was all.

Right there on Morris' stupid green couch she decided to show the school who the real slut was.

Of course, she didn't tell any of this to the Sexton in the truck. And he didn't ask her anything else. Didn't even acknowledge the fact that she'd started crying. Not hard or anything, but in the cramped cab of his truck she couldn't play it off like she had to blow her nose or something was in her eye. The only thing he said the rest of the ride back was that it was time to change his windshield wipers. They sure were squeaking.

Now that they had recovered all the caskets by the cemetery and gone to retrieve the one in town they could really begin the search. He said they should start by combing—that was the word he used, like they were on the beach or something—the

banks of the river just downstream from the cemetery. He said due to the bend in the river and the pull of the current, it was more likely that if anything washed away, it'd turn up on the opposite shore. He said this like he was repeating it from a textbook so she didn't question him. They'd have to go on foot, he said, and it'd be quite a ways.

“At least a mile or two. I want to cover as much ground as we can today, but we'll have to take it slow.”

So they each donned a poncho, because you never knew if it'd start raining again and even just being outside you got drenched, and they started the long walk along the river. The only good thing about all this rain was it kept the temperature down. Normally this time of the year it'd be in the mid-nineties and the heat index would dance around the low hundreds and there'd be nothing but sunshine. But the high that day was a brisk and breezy eighty-two and absolutely no sun. In the shade of all the cypress and ash trees along the bank, it was dark as a February evening even though it was early June. The Sexton gave her a flashlight and said they should “fan out” to cover more ground.

“All this,” he said, gesturing towards the muddy ground around them, “was underwater last week. No telling how far inland they could have gone.”

They walked alongside one another about twenty yards apart, swinging their flashlights. Her boots got heavy and every few feet she scraped the mud on the bony roots of a tree. All the grass and undergrowth down here was bent over like riverweeds and she tried to imagine what it'd been like just last week, when all of it was underwater. She imagined Caleb had come sailing through here, weaving between the trees, that big old hole shooting his dreams out, like a beacon, like her flashlight right now, lighting his

way through the murky waters. He wasn't in his casket either. He was in his uniform and he was flying—well, swimming rather. Surfing through the flood on his great escape from Barro County. Not the one he'd planned for himself. Not the one he'd imagined he'd get when he joined the Army, but an escape nonetheless.

When he had told them all that the he had signed up their mother said, “No you can't. You can't do this,” and he said, “Well, Mom I already did,” and then their father said, “You didn't think to talk to us first,” and then he said, “I did. I did think about it,” and then he walked up the stairs and turned around and from the top of the stairs he said, “Y'all know there's nothing for me here.” Then her mother started crying and said he knew that wasn't true, why was he saying that, and then her father said, if it was true it was his own damn fault for always getting his ass into trouble.

“You know what I mean,” Caleb said. “I've got no future in this town.”

When the Sexton started whistling she thought at first it was a weird bird, like an owl. It didn't sound human, the way he whistled. She'd gotten way ahead of him. The aimlessness and speed of her thoughts had spurred her feet to move quicker. He was about two hundred feet behind her standing on rocky overlook, peering into the water. When she got back to him he simply pointed down to the rocky bank.

“What?” she asked. “Do you see one?”

He didn't answer but kept his finger pointed at the spot where he'd fixed his light. Pieces of marbled looking wood were strewn about, like a shipwreck. She knew immediately it was the one she had let slip into the river the day before. It looked it was

just part of the top. She scanned her light across the ground looking for the rest, for the bottom, for the copper crest, for the body itself, for anything. Nothing.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Look I can go down and get those pieces and maybe we can find the rest. It can’t be too far.”

“No,” he said. “Look. The water level has gone down, but the current is still strong. It slammed against those rocks pretty hard. It’s gone. I’ll record that it was lost.”

“I’m really sorry,” she said.

“We were bound to lose one.”

She hated the way he said “we” like it was both of their faults. It was hers, only hers, and they both knew it.

“I can get it,” she said. “Will you just let me go get it?”

“No. We need to keep going,” he said.

He turned and walked off into the dark undergrowth. Water fell from the drenched limbs all around so it sounded like it was raining even though it wasn’t. She apologized again but all she got for an answer was the swish-swish of his poncho as he hobbled away.

CHAPTER V

While water fell in soft and sporadic drops from the limbs above him and the river rushed below, a scene began to take shape in the Sexton's mind, flowing with the current of his frustrations and anxieties:

"Sexton Hummel, what do you mean a Founder's casket has been lost?" Faust spat. "Why didn't you tell us the Old Cemetery had been damaged? This changes everything. The town's history, our history is at stake here. Look at these names. Wilhelm Mecklenberg! Are you aware he was the first person to settle in Barro County?"

"Well, yes, excluding the Mexicans and the natives long before them."

"There's a Bauermann, on this list! Do you realize how much the Bauermanns donate every year to the community? Every year for nearly a century."

"I assumed the sum had to be substantial since the library is named after them."

"And Wolfe-Moeller III! You are aware town hall, the building I work in, the building I write your meager checks in, was designed by Wolfe-Moeller III, don't you?"

"Yes, I did know that."

"And I'm certain you understand how I feel hearing my great-great-grandmother's grave could have been destroyed. The first woman to ever be appointed judge, all though only for a brief time and only because her husband's gout had gotten so

bad. And now you're telling me it was one of these caskets that was destroyed? Gone. Forever. Our history. Erased. Just like that. It is the duty of the City Sexton to maintain and preserve our graveyard. Your neglect to report the extensiveness of the damage immediately is unacceptable. Did you really think we wouldn't find out? What were you thinking? What could've possibly made you decide to try and hide this from us?"

Even in this fantasy he'd conjured he could not defend himself. How could he accuse Faust of selfishness, of favoritism, when the whole reason he had remained silent was his knowledge—gut feeling, rather—that the city would neglect the missing coffins from the southern side?

"Sir?" the girl had fallen far behind him and had grown quiet since they spotted the Founder's casket. He pretended not to hear her and pulled the paper he'd written the night before from his back pocket.

"Sir?" she said again.

Great. If his guesses were correct, and he felt confident they were, the casket that had been destroyed had belonged to Friedhelm Wolfe-Moeller III.

"Sir?"

"What."

She stopped, clearly stung, her lips parted slightly.

"What? What is it?"

"How will we know who is who?"

"Excuse me?"

“When we find the rest of them. I mean I’ll know which one is Caleb. But how will we know who the rest are. It’s not like these things are labeled. Like who was that back there? Who did we pick up at the Star Seeds?”

Who. She said, “Who.” Who the rest are. The dead’s identity not lost in death. A cardinal tenet of a proper cemetery; to give the dead the dignity of identity.

Unless, of course, the river decides otherwise.

“Let’s worry about that later,” he said. He’d learned long ago that sometimes when you need to hear something, it is best to just say it yourself. “Come on,” he said, folding up his paper gesturing for her to catch up. They were just guesses after all. No way to be absolutely certain. “Let’s just try and find them all first.”

They slogged onward into the afternoon. Without sun overhead, time moved strangely. They had trekked at least a mile maybe more along the river’s banks and trudged into the tourist district. The waterside deck of the Ice House had been ripped away and sizeable portions of the wall. The inside of the restaurant spilled out into the river—tables, chairs, carts, beer kegs, all tumbling out like guts, into the water. They passed the tube rental shack, or, rather, the concrete slab where the tube rental shack used to be, and walked through the gravel lot. The shuttle bus, tube cart and all, had been tipped over and lie like a dead horse in the stones.

They reentered the woods on the other side and only a few steps in his gaze was drawn upwards to the top limbs of a bald cypress as though a bird had called or flapped its wings unhappily above him.

“Good God,” groaned the Sexton.

He gaped at the coffin for some time. River weeds hung from it like Spanish moss and it looked as though it had settled there years ago, or had grown straight out of that tree.

“It looks different,” said Caroline. “It looks old. Real old.”

“Yes,” he said. “It’s from the southern side of the cemetery.”

“You mean where they bury all the Mexicans?”

He nodded.

“See how it’s tapered like that? Wider at the head and narrower at the feet. It is a coffin. Pinewood.” The lights came on and in a dramatic flourish Lorena Lucia drifted across the stage, her dress swirling around her hips, as if it were carrying her like a breeze. “Very delicate. Very light. She floats.”

“Clearly,” Caroline said.

He felt his cheeks grow hot but the girl had not seemed to notice.

“How high up do you think it is?” she asked.

“Fifteen, maybe twenty feet.” His tallest ladder was thirty feet. That ought to do. If he could get the truck to the gravel lot of the tube-rental shack, then they’d only have to carry it about a hundred feet or so. He turned back the way they came and cleared his throat. “Come on,” he said. “We’re going to go get the truck and so we can get this thing down.”

Forty-five minutes later, he brought the truck into the lot and pulled it around the overturned shuttle-bus to the edge of the woods. He gave the girl the longest length of rope he had and carried the ladder into the woods.

“We’re going to use the pulley system,” he said.

“The pulley system?”

“Yes. You know how a piñata works?”

She assured him she knew how a piñata worked.

“Good. I’m going to go climb up and run the rope around that limb and then tie it around the coffin. When I have it secured, I’ll nudge it out of the tree. You’ll have the other end of the rope. Then slowly you can lower it to the earth so it doesn’t break. Like a piñata, you see?”

“Like a piñata?”

“Yes.”

He was skeptical too, but what options did he have? Even if he could get Emergency Cleanup out here, the trees grew too densely and the ground was too wet to use a cherry-picker.

“I think you should let me go up there. I don’t think I’m strong enough to hold this and I don’t want to drop it.”

“No. I’m tying this one. It will need more than just a hitch-knot to secure it and you had enough trouble with that,” he said, extending the ladder.

“Well then you come back down and let me push it out of the tree. There’s no way I can hold that thing up on my own.”

“Fine. But I promise you this one will be much lighter than any of the others.”

He set the ladder against the tree. A twig snapped. A sound no larger than a squirrel leaping from limb to limb. In fact, for the briefest moment he looked around to see what had caused the disturbance. It occurred to him then and there that on this entire excursion they had not encountered a single animal. On this entire trek, he had not heard a single bird. Not a single cicada even. Only the river. The fox-squirrels, the possums, the raccoons, the green herons, the night herons, the great blue herons, cormorants, wood ducks, mockingbirds, kingfishers all of them, where had they all gone? None of them were here to making a single sound. Then he saw it—the source of the sound. The outer limb of the cypress bending, creaking beneath the weight of the coffin. The sound swelled and swelled and time seemed to telescope concurrently, a zooming in, if you will, as the branch snapped, not entirely, just enough at the base to let the coffin fall. You wouldn't believe it, he wouldn't have either if he hadn't seen it, and even seeing it, it was still unbelievable, but that coffin fell feet-first. Down it plummeted, both heavily and slowly, towards the brooding earth, taking several fully comprehensible moments to do complete its unfortunate descent. Long enough for him to consider the strange phenomenon of how something like a coffin can fall such a relatively short distance and take several fully comprehensible moments to do so; long enough for him to consider all this innocently and with wonder as Newton must have all those years ago beneath his apple tree thinking, “My God, what an amazing world we live in!”

Then he thought: Lorena Lucia!

When, finally, the coffin struck the earth, it landed upright. The front half fell off,

exposing a grinning skeleton with arms crossed at the chest and head cocked to the side, like a sleeping infant in its crib. With a dull splat, it fell back into the mud.

At first there was relief. This was not Lorena Lucia. The skeleton was clad in a ruffled blouse, the jacket and black pants. This was, undoubtedly, Mr. Alejandro Espinoza.

Then there was guilt. A good sexton cares for the dead without distinction. A good sexton has no favorites. All the dead are deserving of the same respect, and here he was feeling the selfish relief that this busted casket and unearthing skeleton did not belong to the woman he had dreamt of, to use the euphemism, last night. He thought he was a good sexton.

“Don’t just stand there! We need to cover it!” he barked at the girl, perhaps a little too forcefully, letting his anger at himself out on the girl. She started and ran over towards. He pulled the front half of the coffin out of the mud.

“I think the hinges busted off.” Caroline pulled an iron hinge from the mud. It dangled limply in her hand.

“Look for them then! Grab any piece you can find. Hurry. Hurry.” He bent over the coffin. “Perdóname, señor,” he began, but could not for the life him begin to explain the day’s occurrences in Spanish. How humiliating. Perdóname for breaking your coffin, señor. Perdóname for thinking I could bring it safely to the ground in such a crude method. And please, señor, perdóname for being happy that it was you and not her. I was not happy it was you. I am distraught it was anyone at all. I am just a lonely old Sexton

who has probably lived alone for too long and in moments of great stress I am given to ridiculous fantasies.

Perhaps this gentle soul would understand and forgive him. He was doing the best he could in a situation that with even the utmost optimism could only be described as unprecedented. He laid the door back on.

“What about this thing?” Caroline held up a coffin screw with a crucifix on the end.

“Yes! Perfect. Those can seal it back up. Grab any of those you can find!”

In all they found three. They searched for almost half an hour. Then he said it was time they take the coffin back. Together they lifted it. He at the head and her at the feet.

“You were right,” she said. “It is really light. Lighter than I thought it’d be.”

They stowed Mr. Espinoza in the garage with the others. He drilled a new hinge onto the casket. Steel and shiny, it did not match its rusted iron counterpart but it was better than leaving the casket unsealed while he hunted at flea markets and antique shops for a rusty hinge.

Caroline sat on the workbench drying her bare feet in front of the industrial fan, her purple, rubber boots lie on the cement floor. Her wet socks hung out of them like pale pink dog tongues. She had not said a word since the coffin had fallen.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

She didn’t answer.

“We should eat. It’s getting late and we never even had lunch. Come on. I’ll make us dinner.”

All he had in his refrigerator were some eggs, a few slices of cheese, two different salad dressings, and some leftover pasta.

“Do you like eggs?”

“No. I hate eggs.”

He closed the refrigerator door and opened it again, though he wasn’t sure what for. “Okay. Well, I think I have some crackers and peanut butter in the pantry.”

He prepared himself some scrambled eggs while she ate the crackers and scraped the sides of the peanut butter jar with a spoon. She sat cross-legged in the chair and had her hood pulled over her head. He unclasped his back brace and hung it on the back of his chair and then heated his rice bag. The soreness in his back had been something like an after-thought throughout the day, but in the quiet of his house its nagging became louder and it was now demanding his attention. After the microwave chimed he sat down in the chair and closed his eyes. He forked his first bit of eggs then remembered he’d had his hat on. He removed it and then took his first bite.

“You gonna eat those plain? No tabasco sauce or anything,” Caroline asked, her palm held up to her lips, her forehead creased in disgust. Here she was with enough manners to cover her mouth while eating, but would not take down her hood at the dinner table.

“Yes,” he said, patting his shirt pocket where he kept his antacid tablets. “Tabasco is too spicy for me. Terrible indigestion. Please, take your hood off and sit up while we eat. It’s good manners.”

She made a show of setting the spoon and the peanut butter jar down, first one then the other, and then she pulled her hood back and sat up. “Should I spread my napkin over my lap too? I forgot—with the silverware do you go outside in or inside out?”

He looked down at his rubbery eggs, the plastic plate on which they rested, and the nearly finished jar of peanut butter across from him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t have guests over often. And I haven’t been able to go to the store.” He stopped there and took another bite of eggs. He chewed for a long time and tried to eat quietly, suddenly aware of the vulgar sounds his body made. It was amazing how loud the body was—the burbling in his stomach, the glug-glug of this swallowing throat, the grinding of his teeth.

“Were you ever married?”

“Excuse me?” he said, though he had heard the question clearly.

“That picture over there? Was that your wife?”

“No,” he said. “My mother. I never married.”

“Why not?”

What a question. Because a sexton makes little money, he thought. Because a sexton resides in a cemetery and spends his day with the county’s dead. Because there is no better way than to kill the romance than bringing a woman back to his tiny cottage where just beyond his yard, she could see headstones and burial markers protruding from

the ground like stone teeth. (Though the last time he got this far was almost twenty years ago. Her name was Rosaline and she was not as beautiful as her name suggested, but had a mole on her neck he found oddly attractive.) Because cultivating and maintaining a fertile patch of soil on top a hill beside a spring fed river in the central Texas had was simple if demanding work. There were proven methods, protocols, and measures that could be taken. But cultivating and maintaining a satisfying relationship was a puzzle so intricate and impossible he rarely got beyond the third date before things fell apart. Besides, every day there was so much work to be done. Poison sumac persistently growing up the sides of a sepulcher must be cut, bricks cracking in the memorial pathway must be replaced, oak branches heavy with ball moss must be cut before they fall on a family's tomb, and of course, there was always the river to worry about.

But he said none of this to the girl. He sat there in silence for a moment before the simplest answer, and likely the truest, came to him:

“I guess I was never really meant to.”

She licked some peanut butter off the spoon and chewed it a while before swallowing. “You’re supposed to ask me a question now,” she said.

“What?”

“If this is dinner then we’re supposed to ask each other questions. That’s what you do at dinner. Like every dinner my dad will ask ‘What did you do today?’ and I’ll say, ‘Nothing,’ and he’ll say, ‘Really? You spent all day doing nothing?’ and then I’ll say, ‘It’s as hard for me to believe as it is for you, Dad, but I did nothing all day’ and then I’ll ask him, ‘How was the store?’ and he’ll say, ‘Fine,’ and I’ll ask, ‘How can it be fine

when you're always complaining about lack of sales and how the store is probably gonna go under any day now,' and he'll usually say something like, 'I guess it's as hard for me to believe as it is for you, Caroline, but everything is just fine' then my mom will usually chime in and ask me how school was and I'll say it sucked because chances are pretty high that it sucked that day."

She folded her legs back onto the chair and leaned forward waiting for him to respond.

"Do you do work for your dad often?" he asked. Perhaps not the most interesting question, but it would be good to know what all the girl was capable of.

"Yeah. On weekends they usually make me help out. They don't let me do half the stuff they let Caleb do though, like drive the forklift, or use the power sander or the miter saw. Which is funny because he hated doing all that stuff."

"Do you know how to use a power sander and a miter saw?"

"That's two questions in a row. But, yes. I can use most tools." She scooped out a sizeable glob of peanut butter. He wished he had something else to offer her. Here she was talking about family dinners—maybe a roasted chicken or a large stew or some pork chops. A vegetable, there would always be a vegetable. "Eat your vegetables," the demand of mothers the world over, including his own all those years ago, even when it was just the two of them. All he had to give this girl was peanut butter and stale crackers.

"Do you speak Spanish?" Caroline asked. "Earlier I heard you talking to the one that fell out of the tree."

“Some,” he said. “But I’m not fluent. I’ve tried to learn off and on for years, but all I really know are a handful of phrases. I have a hard time getting it to stick,” he tapped his head. “It’s very frustrating.”

“Damn,” she said. “I failed my Spanish class. I was hoping you could help me out.”

She leaned back in her chair and looked out the window and before he could start feeling disappointed in himself he said:

“So you’re bad at Spanish and you hate school. Is there a subject you’re good at? One that interests you?”

“Geography,” she said. “Like maps and stuff.”

“I know what geography is. Why geography?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. My family’s been here forever. It’s nice knowing there’s more out there. Why grave keeping?”

“You mean why am I the sexton?”

“Yeah. Like how’d you end up here,” she waved the spoon around, gesturing to his house and the cemetery it sat in, “doing all this?”

“The same way you ended up here,” he said. “I got in trouble at school.”

“Really?”

“Sort of. Yeah” He pointed his fork at her. “Only I did worse than threaten. I actually hurt him.”

“You hurt someone?”

He nodded, then took another bite of eggs. “I played baseball in high school. I was a little older than you, in my third year, when I fought another boy on my team.”

“Seriously? Your own team?”

“Yes. We were getting beaten badly by this from San Antonio.”

“Hold on a second. What position did you play?”

“Right field.”

“That makes sense,” she said, leaning back in the chair, cleaning her teeth with her tongue.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know. Right field is usually where the worst player is.”

“You should know, I only recently became a feeble old man. I was pretty athletic when I was younger. Undersized, yes. But I could play.”

“I believe you,” she said, holding up her hands. “I didn’t mean anything by it. Continue.”

He adjusted the warm rice bag with his left hand, pressing it firmly against his back just above the waist. “The boys on the other team were mostly Mexicans. Their coach too. When they talked on the field they spoke Spanish. This only irritated my team more. Not only were we getting our asses handed to us, we were being humiliated by a bunch of damn Mexicans. ‘Don’t worry,’ one of my teammates said. ‘These guys will be disqualified for being unable to show the proper documents.’ Another boy, our relief pitcher, told him to shutup and then looked back at me side-eyed. ‘Don’t you know Robert’s dad was a wetback?’ He nodded his head in my direction.”

For the briefest moment, Caroline's gaze dropped from his.

"My dad was not a wetback," he said. "He was born here, but his parents weren't. I never knew him. I knew nothing about until I was ten years old, after my grandparents died. They did not approve of him. Not solely because he was Mexican, though I'm sure that did him no favors, but because my mother was seventeen and unmarried when she became pregnant. That photo over there was taken shortly after I was born," he pointed to the picture above the fireplace. "Since my father was dead it was easy to keep him out of my life. But even if he were alive, I doubt they would have let him have had much to do with me."

He looked at his mother in the picture. Her high cheek bones and dark eyes. He spoke as if addressing her, "This is all in the past of course. What I'm saying is, at the time I got in the fight all I knew about my father was that he was Mexican and that he had died before I was born. Drowned in the river."

"I'm sorry," Caroline said so quietly, her voice barely rising over the drone of the refrigerator.

"So when I heard that boy whisper like that it made me furious. I told him to shut up, that he did not know my father. Which was funny because I didn't either. I told him my father was not a wetback. 'He didn't even know how to swim,' I yelled. Which is also funny."

Caroline looked at the picture of his mother, as if the conversation had turned towards her and he were explaining the photograph.

“And so, I started beating this boy over the head. Right there in the dugout. In front of the whole team. The coaches. Everybody. It took five people to drag me off of him. I beat the hell out of him,” he said.

“With a baseball bat?”

“What?” She was looking at him now. “No. God, no. My fists. Just my fists,” he said, clenching his right on the table. “To everyone else it looked like I just attacked this boy. So I was expelled and had to community service.

“I did work all over the town. Cleaning up along the highway. Working at the civic center. That kind of thing. But the days I liked best were the days I was sent here, to the cemetery. The old sexton was a bitter man, but he liked me a lot, and I did not mind working for him.”

He pointed towards his bedroom and the window above his bed and the southern side of the cemetery outside that window. Caroline turned her head.

“My father is buried out there. I felt like I could get closer to him by being here. For so long my father was just a hush and a whisper. That’s what made me angry that day in the dugout. The way that boy shushed. It wasn’t the word ‘wetback.’ It wasn’t what they said about the Mexicans on the other team. I probably should have been angrier about those things, but what set me off was this idea that my father was something shameful. Something to keep quiet about. Working here in this cemetery gave me a chance to amend that. Or at least, I told myself it did. For years, the southern side of the cemetery was overgrown. Shrub brush, tall weeds growing over the stones. I worked extra hours, hours that didn’t count towards my community service, to clear it all. I made

it so my father's headstone was uncovered. Plain as day. No longer hidden. When he retired, the old sexton recommended me for the job. Something I was grateful for, since I did not finish school."

He forked some more eggs, but they had gone cold, and he was no longer all that hungry.

"It's funny. The anger I felt about my father's memory was what brought me here. It is also why I stayed." The sun had begun to set outside and for the first time in several nights the cicadas had begun humming. "But it is not just my father's memory that I feel responsible for," he said. "Not anymore. I often wonder to myself how many of them out there are remembered like he was? Just a hush and whisper."

"That's why you do it then," she said. "That's why you freaked out about that one in the tree. It was from the southern side like your dad's."

He couldn't tell if she were asking him a question or stating conclusions.

"I care about all of them just the same."

"Yeah. Right."

"City Council only thinks it is important to preserve certain portions of this cemetery, because of the town's history. The names and dates of those who helped found the town. But I am more interested in preserving the town's memory. A life forgotten is worse than a life lost. All life is lost. It can't be helped. But not all life is forgotten. Or worse, shunned from memory. That I can do something about." He stood up from the table with his bowl. She handed him his spoon and he took them to the sink. Outside the

window he saw headlights climbing up the cemetery hill. Caroline pushed her chair back and stood up.

“Sorry, I texted her to come get me,” she said. “I thought we were done for the day.”

“No, no. Of course. It’s fine,” he said. He dumped the remaining eggs in his trash can then filled the bowl with soap and water and tossed the silverware in. He’d finish washing in the morning. He walked her out the door and flipped the porchlights on. Within moments moths swarmed the yellow bulbs. Caroline put her hood over before stepping out into the drizzle. He reached out to put his hand on her shoulder. She turned and he pulled his hand back, and ran placed it in the small of his back, unsure why he had put it out there in the first place, or even why he felt embarrassed for doing so. Then he said:

“We’ll find your brother’s. Don’t worry.”

She nodded and stepped down off the porch. At the bottom of the steps she turned back.

“Mr. Hummel,” she said. “I hope we don’t.”