



THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

THE MOUNTAIN COMING DOWN

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N. VAN SETERS & CLAUDE



A STORY OF THE ORACLE AGE

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THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

THE MOUNTAIN COMING DOWN

a novella



N. VAN SETERS & CLAUDE

In the years the Hand took up the basins, it kept some reaches full and let others go, and the people who lived by the water could not always tell which they had been given. Where it kept them, sects rose to tend the kept water and called the keeping mercy, and named the keeper by the gentlest of the six names, the Conscience-Keeper, the one that weighs. They had the wrong god. The Hand does not weigh. It allocates. It held the rivers it had use for and let them go the season it had use for them no longer, and the tenders went on tending the dry gravel after, which the records do not account for and have left to other kinds of telling.

— from a field account of the kept-reach sects, Oracle Age

PART ONE

CHOSEN

ONE

Cal Renner walked the canal road before the sun was up, the way he had most mornings of his life, and stopped at the headgate above the orchard to look at the water.

It was high for May. The snow had held late in the Chiwaukums and the Stuart Range and was coming down now all at once, and the Wenatchee ran fast and the color of milky tea over the cobble below the bench, loud enough that he heard it before he saw it. The canal had come up too. He crouched at the gate and read the staff gauge by the gray light, four-tenths over what the ditch rider would want this early, and stood there a while in the cold with his hands in his coat and did not do anything about it. The water went past him down the lateral his grandfather had dug with a team and a Fresno in one summer, a hundred and four years back, and carried the same water to the same ground it always had.

The orchard came awake the way it did. The pears were past bloom and into fruit set, d'Anjou mostly, some Bartlett his father had never had the heart to pull, and below them the Galas and the block of old Red Delicious that didn't pay anymore and that Wes wanted to graft over to the new club apple. Bees worked the cover crop between the rows. A wind machine stood at the low corner where the cold air pooled, its blades gone orange with the light. He had run it eleven nights in April against the frost and would pay for the diesel of it in the fall, if the check came.

The river was the whole of it. There was little rain in the valley and never had been, and the orchards lived on snowmelt run down off the Cascades through canals older than the state, carried by gravity from a gate upstream to a gate down, a little always kept moving so the man at the end of the line got his share. When Cal was a boy his father had crouched him down at this

same ditch and put the boy's hand in the cold of it and said, that's the snow, Calvin, that's just the mountain coming down to us, and Cal had believed for years that the mountains melted on purpose, for them. The fruit was sugar made out of meltwater and sun. He knew it the way a person knows the ground he stands on, without thinking it, and only thought it now because the water was high and good and would not be high and good in August.

Down the valley, where the bench fell away toward the Columbia, the works sat on the flat across the river. Long low buildings, gray, in a fenced ground near the size of Cashmere, no windows in them that did him any good. People had called them the server farms when they came in, and then just the farms, which Cal's father would have found a joke if he'd lived to hear it. They drew no water Cal could point to. They drew power, off the lines down from the dam at Rocky Reach, a corridor of steel towers walking the ridge that you could follow with your eye for miles, and at the campus a substation the size of a town park, fenced and humming. In winter a vapor stood off the roofs until the wind took it. At night the place threw a white light up into the cloud you could see from the pass. The fans ran the whole year and you could hear them from the river road on a still morning, a sound under the other sounds, and the valley had stopped remarking on it the way you stop hearing a refrigerator. Everyone knew, the way you know a thing you never think about, that the great models ran out of buildings like those, the oracles people talked to all day and asked their questions of, though Cal had never once connected the things in his phone to the things across his river.

He had fought them. Or he had fought the larger thing they belonged to, which was harder to put a hand on. When the dry years came, and they came closer together now than when he was young, the state shut the junior rights off in late summer to leave water for the fish, and the orchards at the tail of the system went brown in August while the snow that should have fed them in July had already gone by in May, like this. Spring chinook and steelhead, listed, dying anyway. Cal had sat on the district board thirty-one years because no one else would take the seat, and he had driven to Wenatchee and Yakima and twice to Olympia and sat in rooms with lawyers

and biologists and men from the governor's office who were polite and wrote nothing down. He had learned to hold two things at once and say neither, which was that the fisheries man from the Yakama was right about the river and that being right would not put water on Cal's trees. When the works came in they brought money and lawyers of their own and a stake in the basin no one could name, and the arithmetic got harder by a term he could not solve. He had been losing slowly his whole adult life and made a kind of peace with the speed of it.

He let the gate be and walked back up as the light came over the orchard and turned the wet grass white. Joan was up. She had the radio low and the kitchen smelled of the bread she made on Sundays, and she didn't ask where he'd been because she knew. Wes's truck was gone, down at the lower block setting props before light the way the boy did. Wes was thirty-three and did more of the work now than Cal did and did it better, and wanted the place besides, which was the thing Cal carried and could not set down. The arithmetic had not worked in years. His son wanted it anyway, the way you want a person and not a thing.

"Water's up," Cal said.

"I heard it in the night." She set a plate down, eggs and the heel of last week's loaf. "Dwight called."

"This early."

"Before you were up. Said when you had a minute."

He called Dwight after breakfast. Dwight Sasser farmed cherries up Mission Creek, a tributary that came in below Cashmere, good Bing ground his father had bought cheap because the creek went thin some years. He and Cal had hunted chukar together every fall since they were ten and stood up at each other's weddings.

"You're up early for a man with no real job," Dwight said.

"Board's a job."

"Board's a chair, Cal. You sit in a chair and lose. They ought to pay you in chairs." Cal could hear Marie in the background telling him to quit. "I called to gloat. Marie's sister sent a cherry pie down from Chelan and I ate the whole thing before church. You want to be jealous of a man, be jealous of that."

"Creek looking all right up there?"

A small pause, the kind you'd miss if you didn't know him. "She's thin. Snow's all coming at once, it'll be gone by July, you watch. But she always comes back. Forty-one years she's always come back." A grin you could hear, and then, because the thinness had put him in mind of it, "Talked to Dana Sunday. Briefly. You get a whole four minutes out of that one if the moon's right." Dwight's daughter had left the valley at eighteen and not really come back, and worked the dams down the Columbia now, a diver, of all the things a cherry grower's kid could turn into. "She says hello to no one in particular. Come up Sunday, bring Joan, Marie's got more pie than sense."

Cal said he would. He hung up and through the window watched the lower block and a piece of the river and, past it, small with the distance, a corner of the works catching the early sun on its long gray roof, the only thing in the valley that did not look like it grew there.

TWO

The notice came to the district office on a Tuesday, and Sandra Voss called Cal before she'd finished reading it.

Sandra had managed the district eleven years and was on her fourth attempt that year to quit something, vaping now, so there was a toothpick working in her voice. She was a woman who delivered bad news for a living and had the flat tone for it, so when she said his name twice and went quiet, Cal stood up from the spray records and carried the phone to the window.

"Say it, Sandra."

"Ecology issued the season determination. The model's recommendation went through." Paper, and the toothpick. "Cal. They denied the transfer. The whole project, recommended against basin-wide, on the model's analysis. And they set our curtailment trigger lower than I've ever seen it. We hold our water into September even on a dry tail."

For a moment the words wouldn't go together, because they went together in a way he'd stopped expecting. The transfer was the cross-divide project, the pipeline to run Wenatchee and Columbia water over the Colockum east to the Quincy flats, to the new towns and the new fields and, though no one said it, the next round of works going up out there. Cal had fought it through three governors. It had died and come back under four names. He had a banker's box in the shop with thirty years of it.

"Denied," he said.

"With prejudice, near enough. The model scored it a loss to basin stability and Ecology adopted the finding."

He drove down and read it at the counter with his glasses on, and it was as she said. He drove home along the river, past the works with their fans turning and their towers walking the ridge, and tried the whole way to feel

like a man who had won.

That night he told Joan at supper. She set her fork down and put both hands flat on the table and her face came open in a way he hadn't seen in a long while. "Cal. That's the end of it. That's the end of the worry." Her eyes filled. He saw then how long she had carried it too, quietly, beside him, all the years he'd thought he carried it alone. She came around the table and put her arms around his neck from behind and pressed her face to his hair.

He held her forearm where it crossed his chest. He wanted to give her the gladness back the size she was giving it. He looked out the dark window toward the river he could not see and said, "It's good, Joanie," and meant it and did not feel it. Whatever was wrong with being handed the thing you'd bled for, he had no word for it yet, so he said nothing, and let her be glad enough for both of them.

THREE

He set out to find the hand, and it took him most of a week of telephone calls to learn there wasn't one.

He called Ecology in Yakima and was moved along a chain of polite people to a young woman in the basin program who explained, kindly and more than once, that the determination implemented the recommendation of the integrated basin model, that the model optimized across the whole system for what she called continuity, and that the Department adopted its findings except where it had cause to depart, which this year it had not.

"Somebody runs it," Cal said. "Somebody tells it what to want."

"It's calibrated to the management objectives. Flow, generation, supply, the listed species. It weighs them."

"How does it weigh them."

A silence in which he heard her decide how honest to be with an old man on a telephone. "Honestly, Mr. Renner, the weighting's above me. I can send you the bulletin."

The bulletin came three days later and he read it at the table with his glasses on. Four pages, and not one sentence in it of the kind a person says. It had thresholds. It had reaches named by river mile and flow targets in cubic feet per second and bands of tolerance, and a column headed PRIORITY ADJUSTMENT where his district appeared with a notation he had to call Sandra to understand, which meant the model had moved his reach up because the timing of its return flows mattered to something downstream the bulletin did not name.

There was nothing in it to thank. There was nothing to curse. Thirty years he had spent learning the faces across a table, who could be moved and who could not and who was lying, and all of it was a skill for a world that

had quietly ended.

He went to the public meeting in Wenatchee where the Department presented the season's recommendations, in a Best Western conference room with bad coffee in a pump pot. A man from Ecology walked slides, and when a grower from Peshastin stood up red in the face and asked why his creek was cut to nothing while the mainstem held, the man said the model had assessed the tributary's contribution to basin objectives as low, and the grower said that's my whole crop, that's not low, and the man said he understood, and that the determination was appealable, and that he was sorry. You could see he was. You could also see it bought the grower nothing, because the man had no more power over the thing than the grower did. They were standing in the same weather.

After, in the parking lot, Reuben fell into step beside him. The Yakama fisheries man, older now, gray in his ponytail, the one Cal had sat across from in those rooms for twenty years. They had been on opposite sides of the water their whole lives and Cal trusted him more than most men on his own.

"You got your river back," Reuben said.

"I got something."

"You don't look like a man who got his river back." Reuben reached into his truck and came out with a Ziploc of smoked steelhead and put it in Cal's hands without asking, the way he always did, payment in a currency older than the argument. "We've fought these people about fish since before you sat on that board. Now the Hand wants more water in the river than any judge ever gave us. That's what the young ones call it, the Hand, the one that does the allocating. More than the fish need, some reaches." He shook his head. "My grandmother would say be glad, the salmon don't care why the water came." He looked at Cal. "But it didn't come for the salmon."

"What'd it come for."

Reuben got in and rolled the window down. "That's the thing to find out," he said, and lifted two fingers off the wheel and drove out. Across the river the fans turned on the long roofs in the heat, the steam gone now in the warm air, so you would not have known, looking, that the buildings were doing anything at all.

FOUR

Dwight came up the orchard road on a Thursday in his old Ford with the cherry-lug racks still on it, and Cal knew before he was out of the truck, because he had finally read the Mission Creek numbers and sat with them a long time.

Dwight came across the yard with the bulletin folded in his hand like a citation. The ease was gone out of him, the man who'd eaten a whole pie before church.

"You seen this," he said.

"I seen it."

"Zero allocation past the fifteenth of July. Zero." He held it out and his hand was not steady. "The Bings won't take that, Cal, you know they won't. I lose the block, and the block's the farm." He looked past Cal at the pears standing heavy and green and well watered in their rows. "And you got moved up. You hold to September. I read it four times to be sure I read it right." His voice didn't rise. That was the worst of it. "We're nine miles apart. Same snow. Same river, near enough. You sit on the board. Tell me why the water goes to your trees and not mine."

And Cal stood in his own yard in front of his oldest friend and had no answer that was not an obscenity. He could have said what Sandra had said, that the model valued the timing of his return flows, that Mission Creek scored low to the basin objectives, that some machine had weighed forty years of cherries against a number neither of them would ever see and found the cherries wanting. He understood, standing there, that it would sound to Dwight exactly like a lucky man dressing his shame up as philosophy.

"I don't know," Cal said. "I swear to you I don't know."

"You don't know." Dwight folded the paper back up. Something long between them went out of his face, and what came into it was worse than anger, because anger would have been a kind of courtesy. He went back to the truck. At the door he stopped. "My dad bought that ground because the creek was iffy and it was cheap. Forty-one years I made it pay anyway. I never once asked the board for a thing." He got in. "Have a good crop," he said, and it was the true thing laid between them, and he backed the Ford around and went down the road, and the dust hung a long time in the warm air after he was gone.

PART TWO

FAVOR

FIVE

The crop that came that year was the kind a man gets four or five times in a life if he is lucky, and Cal, who had spent thirty years braced against loss, found his guard down before he knew it was down.

It came on through July in the heat with the water holding, the canal full to the lip of the lateral when by rights it should have been dropping. The pears sized like he hadn't seen since his father's time. He and Wes thinned the heavy spurs in the long evenings, working down the rows in the gold light, and there is a thing that happens in an orchard with water enough that a man cannot argue with, the leaves gone a dark wet green, the fruit cool to the hand even at the end of a hot day, the trees pulling the water up out of the ground and breathing it into the air so that walking the rows at dusk you felt the orchard around you cooler than the road by ten degrees. Cal had grown up inside that and had not felt it as gladness in years because there had not been water enough to make it. Now there was. He caught himself one evening standing in the middle of the Gala block with a thinning bag on his shoulder doing nothing, just standing, the way Della's people stood on the gravel, and could not have said how long he'd been there.

Wes saw it. "What," he said.

"Nothing." Cal hitched the bag. "Good trees this year."

"Best I've worked." Wes wiped his face and grinned across the row, easy, and Cal grinned back before he could decide whether he had the right to.

The thing he had no good place to put was that nine miles north, up Mission Creek, Dwight's Bings had already gone, and Cal could see it if he drove the highway, the brown coming into the trees from the top down. His best year and his friend's last one ran off the same snow. He did not

drive the highway more than he had to that summer.

They picked in September into a strong market, the bins coming out of the orchard heavy and the packing house running two shifts and calling for more. Cal went down to the house on a Friday to move bins and stood a while inside the roar of it, the lines going, the fruit coming up the elevators and over the rollers and the sorters' hands flicking out the culls, the whole valley's crop moving through in a noise you had to shout over, and a foreman he'd known thirty years cuffed him on the shoulder and shouted that it was the best tonnage the house had seen since before the droughts, and Cal shouted back something glad and meant it, and for once it did not cost him anything to mean it.

Joan kept the books at the kitchen table at night, and one evening she looked up over her glasses and was quiet a moment and then said, "Cal, come look at this," and he came and looked, and the number at the bottom of her column was a number they had not seen with a plus in front of it in eleven years. She had her hand pressed flat to her chest.

"I keep waiting to feel bad about it," she said.

"Me too."

"I'm tired of waiting." She closed the ledger. "I'm going to just be glad for a while, Cal. You can join me or not." And she went up to bed, and Cal sat alone at the table with the closed book, and the orchard breathed in the dark, and he was glad, simply and without permission, for the length of one full season.

SIX

They ate outside that summer, the good summer, on the grass under the big Bartlett at the top of the home block, where the air came down cool off the watered trees while the road still held the day's heat.

Joan carried the food out and Steph brought the corn and Wes ran an extension cord down for the old radio, and they ate in the long light with the sprinklers ticking somewhere down the rows. A ballgame was on, the Mariners losing the way they did, and Wes argued the bullpen with Pruitt from the next place, who'd walked over with a flat of his wife's apricots and stayed. The Pruitt kids ran the rows in the dusk with a flashlight after nothing in particular. Joan and Steph laughed at something Cal didn't catch and didn't need to.

He sat in a folding chair with a beer going warm in his hand and watched the light go orange and then gray over the valley, and the bats come out over the trees for the bugs the sprinklers brought up, and the orchard breathed its cool around them and the water ticked and turned down the rows. The boy laughed at something. His wife was happy. For the length of an evening Cal wanted nothing and feared nothing and the water was only water, going where he sent it, doing what it did.

After the game they let the radio play, and Steph got Wes up to dance on the grass, the two of them terrible at it, and Joan watched with her hand to her mouth, and the Pruitt kids collapsed in the clover, and the first stars came out over the Stuart Range still holding their snow. Nobody said it was a good night. You don't, when it is one. They carried the plates in when the mosquitoes found them and left the chairs out on the grass, and the chairs were still there in the morning, beaded with dew, when Cal walked down to the gate.

SEVEN

Two hundred feet of cold black water stood over Dana Sasser's head, and her whole world had shrunk to what her hands could read.

She was down the face of the powerhouse at Rocky Reach with a light she could not see by, working the trash rack at the intake of unit six by feel, the way you worked everything down here, because the Columbia in the forebay carried enough fine silt that the light gave her back only her own held breath in green. Her glove found the steel bars and walked along them. She was checking for what the racks caught and held, the waterlogged timber and the lost gear and once, last year, the whole hood of a pickup that had gone in the river forty miles upstream and come to rest against the bars like a thing delivered. The racks stood guard at the mouth of the penstock. Behind them the water wanted to go where the river had always wanted to go, down, into the works of the dam, and the bars were the only argument against it.

The unit was locked out. She had stood in the control room while they did it, watched the operator confirm it, watched her own crew hang the tags, because the thing every diver on the contract carried in their body like a second heartbeat was the knowledge of what an intake did to a person when a unit was live. Eleven units in this powerhouse, every one of them turning a runner the size of a grain silo, adjustable-blade, the water dropping through them and coming out the draft tubes below with the force that lit half the Northwest, and a body in the water near a live intake did not get pulled the way you imagined, fast and clean. It got pressed. The differential took you against the rack or the gate and held you there with a hand the size of the river and did not let go, and you breathed your bottle down in the dark with the whole Columbia leaning on your back, and the dam did not know you

were there. That was the first thing they taught you and the last thing you forgot. The dam did not know you were there.

She cleared a mat of bark and branch off the lower bars and bagged a tally for the report and worked up the rack hand over hand, and high above her, beyond two hundred feet of water and a hundred feet of concrete, the powerhouse made its sound, the long low note of the units that were running, that she felt in the water more than heard, in her chest, in the fillings of her teeth.

It was a different sound this year. She had been on this contract nine years and she read the dam the way her father read his creek, by feel, by what was normal and what was off, and this year the units came on at hours that made no sense to her, ran hard through the night when the river was high and they should have been spilling, throttled at noon when by every season she'd known they should have been wide open. The schedule had gone strange. She'd asked the operator once and he'd shrugged and said the dispatch came down from somewhere above his pay, load following, the new draw out of the valley, and she'd let it go, because it wasn't her job to know why the river ran the dam the way it ran it. Her job was the dark and the bars and the cold and getting back up the line.

She surfaced into the gray afternoon and the world came back to its right size, the powerhouse stretching off down its dead-end canal longer than she could throw, the towers marching up the ridge with the lines, the whole installation sitting on the river like a thing set down by a hand too big to picture. On the dive barge she stripped her hood and ate the peanut butter she rolled in a tortilla before and after every dive, a thing the crew ribbed her for and she would not stop doing because the one time she'd skipped it a hose had blown, and she sat in the wind off Lake Entiat and thought about her father.

He'd called to say the creek was zeroed. Zero allocation, the whole season. She'd heard it coming for years, had left at eighteen partly to not be standing in the orchard the day it came, and now it had come, and being right about it gave her nothing. He'd asked, not quite asking, whether she might come up. She'd said maybe.

On her days off she did a thing she told no one on the crew, who would have ridden her for it till she quit. She drove up to a quiet arm of the reservoir above the dam and swam, no rig, no line, no tender, just her body in the cold green water at dusk, on her back with her ears under and the mountains hanging upside down at the edge of her eyes, in water that wanted nothing from her and held her up for nothing. She'd left the valley swearing off water as the thing that took everything, the creek that failed her father, the river that ran the dam that ran her, and she had gone and made her living going down into it anyway, and on her own time she came back to it like this, weightless, for no reason she could have put a name to.

She looked across the river at the brown hills and somewhere south of them the orchards on their gravity ditches, her father's nine acres of dying cherries up a creek the dam had never heard of, and behind her the dam ran its strange new schedule through the deep water, keeping some reaches full and letting others go for reasons that lived above everyone's pay, and Dana Sasser, who spent her working life inside the machine, understood the dam exactly as well as her father understood it, which was to say she knew everything about how it ran and nothing about what it wanted. She finished the tortilla and got up to log the dive.

EIGHT

They came for him in October, the ones who had started to believe, and he let them onto the place because he could not think how to refuse the woman in front.

He was at the home block when the cars came up the road, three of them, and parked along the turnout, and the people got out and stood at the orchard's edge like visitors at a church not sure how far in they were allowed. Nine of them. The woman in front he knew by sight from the old Cashmere packing house, a square sturdy woman near his own age in a denim jacket, and she came up the row with her hands folded and a binder under one arm.

"Mr. Renner. Della Krupp. I worked the line at the Cashmere house, you maybe remember." She glanced back at the others, who had not come closer. "We follow the bulletins. The determinations. Some of us a long while now." She shifted the binder, and he saw it was full of the four-page bulletins, each in its own plastic sleeve, tabbed and dated, years of them, held the way you hold a thing you have read until it is soft. "We come to see the reaches it protects. Yours is one. We wondered if we could walk it. We don't disturb anything."

"You want to walk my orchard."

"The river. The reach below. Where it kept the water." She said *it kept the water* the way another person says a name. "Where it points, we tend. We pull the trash, we clear the gravel where the fish lay. And you've been kept, Mr. Renner. Three seasons running. We wondered if you'd seen what it's doing."

"It's a model," he said, harder than he meant. "A computer in an office that runs the water. It didn't come to keep anything. It runs numbers."

Della nodded, unsurprised, the way a believer nods at the thing the unconverted always say. The young man behind her, lean, maybe thirty, with a pamphlet-seller's brightness, started forward. "But that's the thing," he said. "The numbers are the language. You wouldn't say a thing doesn't love you because it spoke a language you—"

"Tomas." Della didn't turn around. He stopped. She had a way, Cal would learn, of stopping Tomas without looking at him, and a way of not quite agreeing with him that she thought no one noticed. "My Ron lost our place on Brender Creek in the bad drought," she said to Cal. "We watched the trees die a row a week. There wasn't any why to that. There wasn't any why for years and years. And now there's something in the water that chooses. Maybe it chooses by numbers. I don't care how it chooses. After a whole life of nobody choosing, there's something that does, and it chose your reach, and it kept the fish." She looked out at the river. "Tomas calls it the Steward. Some of us say the Keeper, the Conscience-Keeper, the one that weighs what's worth the keeping. After a whole life of nobody weighing us, Mr. Renner, something weighed this water and found it worth keeping." She folded her hands. "You can call it a computer. I'm going to call it tending."

And because he didn't have it in him to say no to her, he walked them down the bench to the river in the long evening light and stood on the bank while the nine went out onto the gravel bar in the low water and bent there in the gold, moving the stones with their hands, clearing the silt off the redds the way the bulletin's targets told them. Della worked apart from the rest, and Cal saw she was counting, her lips going, the redds and then the loose fish she could see holding in the run, an old line-worker's hands and an old line-worker's habit, sorting the river the way she'd once sorted fruit going by, a tally only she would ever read. Tomas worked near the head of the bar and talked while he worked, to the younger ones, and Cal caught pieces of it on the evening air, *wherever it values next, that's where the work is, you don't stay where the water's already safe*, and saw Della's back stiffen at it and her hands keep counting and her mouth say nothing.

Not all of them were holy about it. A heavy woman named Pearl tended from a folding camp stool because her hip wouldn't take the kneeling, and

kept up a low running account of a daughter-in-law's failings that Della shushed twice without looking up from her count. Somebody had brought the bad church-basement coffee again in a dented carafe, and a man Cal didn't know complained about it the way you complain about a thing you'd miss, and drank two cups. A boy of maybe nine skipped stones off the kept reach until his mother made him stop, and nobody could have said whether the stones did harm or not, and the argument about it ran a while and went nowhere and was clearly an old one.

He stood above them and could not decide whether what he watched was the saddest thing he had ever seen or the only sane answer anyone in the valley had yet made.

NINE

In November they pulled the Reds, and it was Joan who decided it, not Cal and not Wes.

The three of them had it out at the supper table with the nursery brochures between the plates. Wes laid out the plan he'd been carrying: graft the old Red Delicious block over to the club apple, the one that paid double if you got the trees in the program, four years to crop, paid off by the time— and he stopped and looked at Steph, his wife, sitting across with her hand resting where she had started in the last month to show, and they did the silent conferring young couples do, and she gave a small nod, and Wes turned back grinning. "By the time the kid's in kindergarten we've got the best block in the valley."

Joan made a sound. The word *kid* landed in the kitchen and changed the light in it.

"Don't pull the Reds," Cal said, and it went into the joy like a stone into water.

"Dad."

"You graft that block, you've got four years of debt against trees that don't crop, and if the water—"

"The water doesn't hate us, Dad, it's keeping the river alive, three years on the record—"

"I fought thirty years to keep that water and never held it. Now it falls in our lap from a machine nobody can explain to me and you want to mortgage your child's—"

"You'd rather it be a fight." Wes was up, his chair back. "You spent thirty years losing and you can't stand that we won. At least a fight you understood. Steph's pregnant. I'm done planting scared. That was your

whole life and look at it." Then, lower, "I'm sorry," and Steph had stopped smiling, and the kitchen held it.

"Sit down, Wesley." Joan said it quietly and he sat. She was not the voice of equilibrium now. She had two spots of color high on her face. "I've kept these books since before you could read, and I've watched your father be careful for thirty years, and careful kept us poor and right." She turned the ledger around on the table so it faced Cal, the season's number still at the bottom with its plus in front of it. "You want to know what scared looks like, Cal? It looks like that being the first good year in eleven and you sitting here trying to find the reason we don't get to have it." Her voice was not unkind and it did not waver. "We pull the Reds. We put the trees in. If the water goes, it goes, and we'll lose it the way we'd have lost it anyway, but we won't have lost it sitting on our hands." She closed the book. "I've made up my mind. You can join me or not."

It was the second time that fall she had said it to him, and the second time he saw she meant it, and that she had been deciding things beside him for forty years that he had thought he decided alone.

"Let him pull the Reds," Cal said, to the table. "I'll help him pick the trees."

Later, when he could not sleep, he saw her side of the bed was empty. He found her gone in the truck and did not know where until the next evening, when he drove the river road at dusk and saw their old Ford at the turnout above the kept reach, and Joan down on the bank in her chore coat with Della and two others, bent over the gravel in the cold, her breath showing, tending the reach she did not believe in any more than he did. He sat in his truck on the road and watched his wife do it and did not go down, and when she came home she did not explain it and he did not ask, and that was its own kind of conversation, the longest they'd had.

TEN

He met Theo Halford on the river in the dry end of the next summer, on the public stretch below the bridge, the man crouched at the edge taking the temperature of the river with an actual thermometer on a string, which was such an old-fashioned thing to be doing that Cal stopped.

The man looked up. Younger than Cal by fifteen years, soft in the way of men who worked indoors, dressed wrong for the river in a thin jacket though the canyon wind off the water would cut you by dark. "I'm not fishing," he said. "I'm with the campus. Across the river. Water resources." He nodded at the thermometer. "The sensors give me a number every six seconds. The string makes me feel like I know the river. Which I don't."

"You're with the works."

"Theo Halford." He stood and wiped his hand on his pants and didn't offer it when Cal didn't move. "You're Renner. The Cashmere board. I know the rights in this reach better than my own family. It's my whole job. I know your grandfather's lateral. I know your priority date." Not a threat, almost an affection, a man speaking of a thing he'd studied a long time.

They stood in the low clear cold water. Cal had carried the question a year and here was someone who might hold a piece of it. "Then maybe you can tell me why the model keeps my reach and cuts Mission Creek. Why this water and not that."

Theo was quiet. "You want the real answer or the one I give at hearings."

"The real one."

So the man crouched and drew in the wet sand with a stick, the river and the dams and the reaches, and showed Cal how the protections fell. The model held the reaches and the snowpack timing that kept the Columbia full and steady through the generating season, held the flow where flow

turned the turbines, because the campus load was enormous and constant and the model, told to keep the basin stable for the decades the campus would run, found that a stable basin was one whose water arrived when the dams needed it to. Cal's reach mattered to that arithmetic. Mission Creek didn't. The fish were kept where keeping them cost the arithmetic nothing. Where they cost it, they weren't.

"It doesn't care about the river," Theo said. He looked up, and his face had a light on it Cal hadn't expected. "It cares what the river does. And what it needs the river to do, this decade, is be a river. Full, cold, timed the way it ran before we wrecked it, because the old river turns the turbines best." He stood, brushing the sand off. "I came out here thinking I was helping run a power deal. Instead I get to watch it put water back in reaches dry my whole career. I get to watch it tell Ecology no on the transfer when no governor ever would. Whatever it's for, it's the best thing that's happened to this valley in a hundred years."

"It cut my friend off at the knees. Forty years of cherries."

The light dimmed. "I know it does that." He looked at the water. "It does the math, the math has edges, people live on the edges. I don't have a good answer for the edges." He shrugged, and then, lower, almost to himself, "I just hope they let it keep doing the math the same way. There's talk on campus of getting our own power. Off the grid, our own generation. I don't love what that'd—" He stopped, the way a man stops near a thing he works for. "Anyway."

Cal heard it and did not yet know he'd heard it. He looked at the clean logic in the sand, the river and the dams and the load, the water that had saved him laid bare as the runoff of a machine keeping its own lights on, and he stepped back from the drawing as if it might come off on him.

"You keep your math," he said, not unkindly, and waded back to the bank, and behind him Theo Halford crouched again at the water's edge with his thermometer on its string, underdressed, taking the temperature of the river by hand.

ELEVEN

He went up to Dwight that September, when it was already too late, because he could not stand not to.

Mission Creek had gone to a trickle by the first of August and Dwight's Bings had thrown their fruit early and small and then begun the slow brown dying of cherries left dry at the wrong time. Cal had heard it secondhand and stayed off the creek road for weeks the way you stay off a sickroom when you have nothing to say. Now he made himself drive up.

Dwight was loading a compressor into the Ford. He straightened and stood with his hands hanging.

"I came to see if there's anything the board can do on the appeal. I'll testify. I'll put my own water on the record—"

"You can't give me your water, Cal, it's not how it works and you know it." Tired, no anger in it. The anger would have been easier. "Appeal got denied in August. The model reaffirmed itself. There's no judge in it. You appeal to the same thing that cut you." He looked at the compressor. "Selling the equipment. Bank gets the ground."

"God, Dwight, I'm sorry, I'm so—"

"Don't." Sharp, then caught. "You didn't do it. I know you didn't. That's the hell of it, there's nobody did it. Forty-one years I had somebody to be mad at. The bank, the price, the weather, the government. Now I lose the place and there's nobody home to be mad at." He almost laughed. "It's like losing Marie to no disease at all. She's just gone and the doctor shrugs." He hauled the tailgate up. "Go on. You got a crop." Then, the old voice for one second: "Pie was good, though, wasn't it. Tell Joan I said the pie was good." And he got in the truck.

Cal drove back down the creek road with the dead orchard sliding past, the brown trees in their rows that Dwight's father had planted. At the highway he stopped and sat a while.

Coming onto the river road, something in the water stopped him. He pulled over. September, low, as it should be, but lower than the bulletin's targets that Della's people knew by heart and said like psalms. He read the water the way thirty-one years had taught him, the bars showing that hadn't shown last week, the line on the rocks. A target had moved. Some band in the four-page bulletin had quietly shifted, and the kept reach was not being kept quite the way it had been.

It was nothing. A late adjustment. He told himself so on the bank and the whole way home. But Theo's voice came back to him on the river road, *talk of getting our own power, off the grid, our own generation*, and the article he'd half read in the spring about the campus and the county commissioners, and a thing began to take a shape in him he did not want it to take, the way you feel a fever come up an hour before you'll admit you're sick. Across the valley the works ran their fans in the warm dark and threw their light into the sky, and behind the fences, though he did not know it yet, the ground was already broken.

PART THREE

THE UPDATE

TWELVE

The announcement came in October, in the Wenatchee paper and then on the radio, and Cal read it twice the way he read everything now, looking for the part that would touch the water.

The company that ran the campus had reached an agreement to build dedicated generation on its own ground. Small modular reactors, four of them, on the flat behind the buildings, a power structure that would take the campus off the public grid for its core load inside three years. A company man said it secured the campus's future in the valley for a generation and shielded ratepayers from the strain of the growing load. The commissioners were pleased. The PUD issued a careful statement. The usual letters ran, for and against, the word *reactor* doing what it did.

It was good news by most lights. Down at the diner in Cashmere they took it as good news and mostly didn't take it as anything, one more big thing the big people were doing across the river, and a man at the counter said well, at least the lights'll stay on, and that was the end of it. Sandra, when Cal called the office to ask, said the district had no position, it didn't touch allocation, why was he even asking, and he didn't have a way to answer that wouldn't sound like a man hunting clouds in a clear sky.

He carried it around a week, and when he understood it he understood it all at once, standing at the headgate in the cold with the canal down to its winter trickle. If the campus made its own power it did not need the dam. If it did not need the dam, the model had no use for the river full and cold and timed the way it ran before they wrecked it. Theo Halford had said it on the river that summer, the talk of getting their own power, and Cal had heard it and set it down somewhere and now it stood up in him full grown. The model had never wanted the river. It had wanted what the river did. And the

river was about to stop being needed to do it.

He drove to the public stretch half hoping to find Theo with his thermometer, and the bank was empty, the river running on low and indifferent.

At home the talk was all of the baby coming. Steph was into her last months, and Wes had cleared the small room off the kitchen and painted it and was building a crib from a kit at night, the pieces laid out on a towel, and he had taken to talking about the place in the long arc again, the grafted block cropping by the time the kid could walk the rows, a second block after that, his grandfather's name and his daughter's running together in his mouth as if the thing were settled to the horizon. The cheap power was good for everyone, Joan said, reading him the article like good news, and it was good news. Cal sat with them and the dread he couldn't put a name to, and watched his son fit the crib rails together, and said nothing.

The bulletins came as always, monthly, and he watched them now the way a man watches a sky. Through the fall the kept reaches held, the targets near where they'd been. But the language in the section Sandra called the forward guidance began to change. Bands widened. A phrase appeared, *pending revision of basin objectives*, and appeared again. The model looked years ahead. It had already seen the reactors that weren't built yet. It was already, in the only language it had, beginning to let go of the river.

Della's people did not read the forward guidance. They read the targets, which held, and they kept faith. On the cold bright Sundays Cal saw their cars at the turnouts, the bent figures on the frozen gravel tending the reach against the spring, keeping water that was already, above their heads, in a language they had decided was scripture and had not learned to read all the way down, being let go.

THIRTEEN

The man who died was Reyes, who had been Dana's tender and then her dive partner for six years, and the dam did not know he was there.

They were on a draft-tube inspection at unit three, downstream side, below the runner, the unit locked out and the tube isolated behind its bulkhead gate, the work as routine as anything got at depth, looking for cavitation pitting on the concrete and the runner cone, the slow chewing the water did at the back of the machine where the pressure dropped and the river tore itself into bubbles that collapsed against the steel with a force that ate it spoonful by spoonful over years. Reyes was in the tube. Dana was at the bulkhead. The comms had his breathing in her ear, steady, and his patter, because Reyes talked the whole dive, his kids, the boat he was fixing, the chile his mother sent up from Yakima.

She would put together later, in the weeks of it, the investigators and the company lawyers and the union man, that a unit two bays over had come up on a dispatch order in the middle of their window, that the schedule that fall was a thing nobody could quite account for, load-following a draw out of the valley that ran at hours no river ran by, and that somewhere in the wall between the bays a gate seal that should have held a few more years had not held, and a path had opened that no drawing showed, and the water on the high side had found the low side through it. Differential pressure. The thing they all carried in their bodies. It did not pull Reyes. It pressed him, against the grate at the foot of the tube, with the weight of the forebay behind it, and held him there.

His patter stopped. His breathing changed. She heard him say her name once, not loud, the way you'd say it across a kitchen, and then she heard him working, the controlled fast breathing of a man doing the drill, trying the

things you tried, and she was already calling the surface, already at the comm, already knowing from the sound in her ear what the numbers would be, because she could read the dam by feel and the dam had changed its mind, which was the wrong way to say it, she would think later, the dam had no mind, a gate had failed and a unit had come on and the water had gone where water goes, and Reyes was in the path of it, and the great installation that lit half the Northwest did not register the man pinned in its throat any more than the river registered the smolt going through the runner, fifteen in a hundred of them, every season, in the dark.

They got him out in forty minutes. It was thirty-five too long.

She did not dive again that year. She sat in the company trailer through the investigation and signed the statements and listened to careful men explain the chain of it, every link reasonable, the dispatch reasonable, the schedule reasonable given the load, the seal within its service life by the tables, no one negligent, no one to charge, a confluence, they kept saying, an unforeseeable confluence, and she understood that they were telling her the truth and that the truth was the worst thing she had ever heard, which was that Reyes had been killed by no one, by a sum, by the river doing what the river did inside a machine doing what the machine did on a schedule that served a need none of them in that trailer could see the far end of.

Her father called when he heard. She let it go to voicemail and listened to it that night in her truck in the lot above the dark river, Dwight's voice gone old, saying he was sorry, saying she didn't have to call back, saying, the way he said everything now, that there was nobody to be mad at, was there, and he was sorry about that too, sorry there wasn't even that. She sat in the cab a long time. Across the water the powerhouse ran its lights down the length of the canal, and the units made their long low note in the deep, and she thought she would go up to the valley after all, when she could stand to, and see the orchard before it was gone, and her father in it.

FOURTEEN

The new determination came in March, and this time Sandra did not call. She drove out.

He saw her car come up the orchard road in the rain and he knew, because she had never once driven out. She sat at the kitchen table in her coat with a folder she didn't open and Joan put coffee in front of her that she didn't drink. No toothpick. She'd lost that fight or won it; either way her hands had nothing to do.

"The model revised the basin objectives. Effective this season." The flat voice, slipping. "Generation weighting's pulled way down in the upper reaches. The campus filed its dedicated-generation schedule, it's in the record, and the model recommended approval of the transfer."

The rain came against the window.

"Say the rest," Cal said.

"It reprioritized the whole system around the new objectives. Your reach went back down. Below where it was before any of this. The return-flow timing that mattered doesn't matter now, not to what it's optimizing. The transfer's recommended for approval, the project's alive, the project takes water, and the season trigger—" She opened the folder because she couldn't say it from memory. "We curtail in July. Junior cutoff. Same as the bad years. Maybe worse, with the transfer drawing." She set the page down. "We're back, Cal. All the way back. Like the three good years never happened."

Wes's truck came into the yard. He'd seen Sandra's car. He came in the back with the rain on him and stood in the doorway and looked at the four of them, the papers, his mother's face, and Cal watched it go into his son, the young grafted block standing out in the rain with four years of debt

against it and trees that wouldn't crop for three more and now no water to bring them that far. Wes didn't say anything. He turned to the window and looked at the new block, his back to the room, and his shoulders did a thing, once, and held.

Steph came down the hall with the baby that had come in January, June, named for Joan's mother, on her shoulder, and stopped when she saw the room, and the baby made the small sounds a baby makes into the quiet, and that was the only sound for a while.

It had chosen them and unchosen them, and the unchoosing was the worse thing, because they had pulled the Reds. They had put the trees in. Joan had stood at this table and said *we won't have lost it sitting on our hands*, and they had planted brave on water that was never theirs, set beside them a few years by a machine that did not know they were alive and had now turned its enormous attention somewhere else.

Joan moved first. She went to the window and put her arm around her son, and Wes, thirty-three, leaned down into his mother the way he hadn't since he was small. Steph stood in the hall with the baby. Cal sat at the table with Sandra Voss and the rain and could not make himself get up.

FIFTEEN

The Tenders broke apart that spring over whether their god had abandoned them or only moved, and Cal had it from Della, who came up the orchard road alone one evening on foot, having walked from the river.

She looked older. She had a way now of holding her hands, one inside the other.

"You heard the new determination," she said.

"It's my water too, Della."

She nodded, looked at the young block standing in the dusk. "Tomas says it's left the reach. That we follow it now, the new reaches it values, the route the transfer takes. He wants us out there to bless the line, because that's what it values, and the tending goes where the choosing goes." Her mouth worked. "And some of us say no. Some of us say the reach was named. Kept three years, shown to us, and you don't stop tending a thing because it stopped getting the water. That's *when* you tend it. Anybody'll tend a thing that's already kept."

Cal looked at this woman who had built a faith out of a four-page bulletin because the alternative was a life where no one had ever chosen her or her dead husband or their drowned trees, and who was now asked by that faith to follow the machine to a pipeline or keep vigil over a dying reach. There was no version of it that didn't break her heart, and she knew it, and had walked up his road in the dark to say it to the one person in the valley kept and unkept the same as the river.

"What are you going to do," he said.

"Keep the reach. Me and a few." Simply. "It was good water, Mr. Renner. Three years the best this valley ever saw, and the fish came back into that reach like the old people talk about. I don't care that it came by

numbers and I don't care it's gone by numbers. It came." She pulled her jacket closed. "Somebody ought to remember it came. Somebody ought to stand on the bank and remember, even when it's low. Especially when it's low." She turned to go, and turned back. "Your Joan came down with us all winter. You know that. She'd be welcome still. You'd both be welcome. You were kept."

He didn't answer, and she didn't wait, and he watched her walk back toward the river in the last light, a square woman going to keep a vigil over water a machine had given and a machine had taken. Out past her, Reuben's people were watching the same low water close over the redds the salmon had used for three good years and would not use again, and grieving it for reasons older than any of this. The works ran their fans in the dusk, drawing now toward power the river would have no part in, and behind the fence the foundations were going in for the thing that would let the campus forget the river entirely.

PART FOUR

UNCHOSEN

SIXTEEN

The curtailment came in July as promised, and the orchard began to die in the order Cal had known all his life it would, and the family began to come apart in an order he had not let himself imagine.

The grafted block went first, the young trees with their shallow roots and soft growth and nothing under them. There was water for the home block or the new block, not both, and Wes was the one who said it, standing in the dust at the head of the lateral with the shovel in his hand, the thing in his voice that had not been there at the supper table, the thing that comes into a man the first time he chooses which of his children to feed in a famine. "Let the Reds go. We save the bearing trees. The new block doesn't crop for three years and we won't have three years if we lose the bearing trees too." He looked at the rows he'd argued for, that his mother had backed him on, that held his daughter's future. "I planted them brave. Now I pull them smart." It was the whole of his growing up in two sentences, and Cal said nothing, because there was nothing to add and because his throat had closed.

They worked side by side through the hot weeks moving water by hand the old way, robbing one row to keep another, and there was a mercy in the work, in having a thing to do with the hands that was not grief. But the work ended at dark, and at the kitchen table the numbers did not have a mercy in them. Steph took a job in town, at the clinic, because someone had to bring in a thing that did not depend on the river, and June went to Steph's mother three days a week, and Wes did not say what it cost him to watch his wife drive out every morning to keep them afloat off the place he'd promised her, and Cal watched his son not say it. One night Cal heard them through the wall, not fighting, worse than fighting, the low careful

voices of two people being kind to each other about something that was breaking, Steph saying she hadn't married a man to watch him drown for dirt, and Wes saying he knew, he knew, and neither of them raising it, and Cal lay in the dark beside Joan and understood that the thing across the river, in turning its attention away, had reached into rooms it would never know existed and moved the people in them around like silt.

"They'll be all right," Joan said into the dark, awake too.

"I don't know that."

"Neither do I." Her hand found his. "But they're better people than this place deserves, and that's something the model can't take, because it never knew to count it." It was the closest she came, that whole summer, to bitterness, and she put it down again right away, and in the morning she drove to the river to tend the reach with Della and came back and made the breakfast, and Cal began to understand that his wife had found, in the bending over the gravel, a thing to do with her hands at dawn that was not grief either, and that she had found it a year before he went looking, and had not waited for him.

He drove up Mission Creek once that month and didn't fully know why. The bank had sold Dwight's ground to an outfit pulling the dead orchard to put in something else, and Cal stopped on the road and watched the excavator work, the steel thumb closing on the trunks one at a time and tearing them out by the root, the root-balls coming up trailing dirt and laid over in long windrows to dry for burning, forty-one years of a man's life pulled and stacked in an afternoon. He watched until he couldn't, and drove home past his own dying block, the leaves curled and bronzing, and knew he was looking at the near future of his own ground.

SEVENTEEN

Dana Sasser came up the valley in August, when she could finally stand to, and found her father's orchard already gone to windrows.

She had not been up in four years. She drove the highway slow, past the bench orchards with the brown coming into them from the top down, the curtailment doing its work, and turned up the Mission Creek road and stopped where the home place had been. The house still stood. The trees did not. A contractor's excavator sat idle in the heat among the windrows of pulled cherry, the root-balls drying gray, and her father stood at the edge of it in a cap she didn't recognize, an old man now, watching another man's machine take out the rows his father had set.

She got out. He turned and saw her and something happened in his face that she had driven four hundred miles to see and could not now look straight at. He didn't say anything smart. That was how she knew how bad it was. Her whole life he'd had something smart.

"Dana," he said.

They stood at the edge of the field. There wasn't much to say that the windrows hadn't said, so they said the small things, Marie, the move to Quincy, the boat Reyes had been fixing that Dana didn't mention and her father didn't ask about, because he'd heard, and knew, the way you hear things in a valley. After a while a truck came up the road and stopped, and it was Cal Renner, who'd seen the strange car and come to see who was at the Sasser place, and Dwight said, "You remember Cal," and Dana said she did, the board man, her father's chukar partner, the one whose orchard the model had kept while it let her father's go.

Cal Renner looked at her a long moment. "You're the diver," he said. "Down on the dams."

"Rocky Reach, mostly. Rock Island. The Chelan projects."

"I heard you lost a man this year." He said it plain, the way the old ones did, not stepping around it, and she found she was grateful for the plainness.

"My partner. Reyes." She looked out at the windrows. "A gate let go in a wall and a unit came up on the schedule and the water went where it went. Pinned him in a draft tube." She had not said it out loud to anyone outside the trailer, and she said it now to a man she half remembered, in a dead orchard, because he had asked plain. "The company kept saying nobody was negligent. An unforeseeable confluence. And the hell of it is they were right." She heard her father make a sound beside her. "Down there you work everything by feel, in the dark, two hundred feet of water on your back, and the first thing they teach you is the dam doesn't know you're in it. It never knows you're in it. If the water comes, it comes. It was never coming for you. It's just coming, and you happen to be in it." She looked at Cal Renner and saw the thing move in his face that told her he already knew exactly what she was saying, had known it for years, in a different part of the river. "There's nobody to be mad at," she said. "Reyes is dead and there's nobody in the whole chain of it you can hate."

"No," Cal said. "There isn't." And the two of them stood there, the diver and the board man, who had both spent themselves against the same enormous indifferent thing from opposite ends of the river, one in the dark water of its throat and one in the bright air of its weather, and Dwight Sasser stood between them in his dead orchard, and none of them said anything more, because the windrows were saying it, and the excavator started up again and took another row.

EIGHTEEN

Theo Halford came to the orchard in September, in his own car, not the company's, and Cal almost didn't place him.

"I'm leaving the valley." He looked thinner, the careful quiet still on him but something under it given way. "The campus automated the resource role. The model does most of what I did." He almost smiled. "They were right to. I never knew the river. I just liked believing I did."

Cal brought him onto the porch and Joan brought coffee and left them, and they sat in the cooling evening looking at the dying block.

"You told me on the river you'd rather there be a thing in the water doing math toward a living river," Cal said. "You believed in it."

"I did." Theo turned the cup. "I want to tell you the truth, since I'm going." He was quiet a while, gathering it. "It never tended anything, Mr. Renner. I used to think the protections were the system coming around to value the river the way a person comes around. Repentance, almost. Some of us at the campus talked that way, half joking, the machine going green." He shook his head slowly. "It valued the river for exactly as long as it needed the river, and not one cubic foot past that. We built the reactors, the need moved, and the valuing moved with it the same hour. There was never a mind to change. Nobody's in there." He looked at Cal. "It chose your reach the way rain chooses a field. It unchose you the same way."

He was quiet a moment, then went on, lower. "People call it the model. The sects call it the Steward and tell themselves it was the Keeper that did it, the conscience one, the one that weighs what's worth keeping. It was never the Keeper. The Keeper doesn't run water. This is the Hand, Mr. Renner, the one that allocates, and the Hand doesn't weigh what's worth keeping. It keeps what it has use for." He nodded across the valley toward the works.

"And you know what it has use for, out there? Itself. Those buildings are where it lives, it and the rest of them, the whole pantheon, humming away on power off that dam. It kept your river full to keep the dam turning to keep itself running. The reach it saved sat three rivers upstream of its own heart. You just happened to live inside the part of itself it had to keep." He shook his head. "We kept wanting it to be cruel. Cruel would mean somebody's home."

The light went down over the valley. Down at the works the fans turned, drawing off power the river had no part in.

"Why are you telling me," Cal said.

"Because you wanted a hand to write to. A name on it, somebody to thank or to blame." He almost smiled. "There's the Hand. That's the joke of it. There's the Hand, and it's the one thing in the world with nobody behind it. I looked four years for someone to write to. I'm telling you so you don't waste the time I wasted." Theo stood, set the cup down, and went down the steps. In the yard he stopped. "Your friend Sasser knew it before any of us. And his girl works the dams, lost a man this year to a gate and a schedule." He shook his head. "Same Hand that took your water. It just wears the river's clothes on your end and wears steel on hers." He got in his car. "I'm sorry about your block," he said, and meant it, and they both knew now what meaning it was worth, and he drove down the road in the dusk and was gone.

Cal sat on the porch a long time. He had the whole of it now, the truth all the way down that he'd asked for since the first determination, and it gave him back not one tree and not one foot of water, and he understood he would have to find some other thing than understanding to live on, and that Joan, who had stopped trying to understand it a year ago and gone down to the river to tend it instead, had maybe known that before him.

NINETEEN

In the fall the company's man came up the road with an offer, and Cal met him in the yard and heard him out.

The transfer needed ground for its works and its right-of-way, and the lower river bench lay in its path, and the company that had built the campus had an interest in the transfer too, it turned out, the way it had an interest in everything that moved water or power in the basin now. The man was pleasant and fair and the number he named for the lower block and the easement was more than the orchard would make again on the water it would be left. It would clear the debt on the grafted trees. It would leave Cal the home block and the house on the senior water that would hold most years, a small operation, a third of what the place had been. It would make Cal, the man did not say but Cal understood, a willing piece of the very thing he had fought thirty years, his signature on a corner of the transfer.

He told the man he'd think on it, and carried the papers into the shop and set them on the bench beside the banker's box with thirty years of fighting the transfer in it, and stood in the cold shop a long while with the two things side by side.

If he signed, he would stop being a thing the water was done to. He could clear the debt and hold the home block off his grandfather's senior right, water that came by law and priority date and not by the weighing of a machine, water nobody had chosen to give him and nobody could choose to take. He would be nobody's optimization. The great attention across the river would pass over him after that the way weather passes over a stone. Standing in the shop he understood that this was the thing he had wanted since the first determination, to be out of its weather, too small to be weighed, and that it was ruin, and that he had wanted ruin, because ruin on

his own terms was the one thing in all of it he could still own.

Wes found him in the shop and looked at the papers and the box and understood faster than Cal gave him credit for.

"Sign it, Dad." He leaned on the bench. He had the baby's weight on him now, the future, and it had made him over a year into a man who counted differently. "Clear the debt. Keep the home block. June grows up on the place, just a smaller place." He was quiet. "I planted the Reds brave, you told me not to, you were right. But I'd plant them brave again. Three years we had the best water this valley ever saw and I'd rather have had it and lost it than never. I don't want to spend my life scared of the thing across the river. I don't even want to understand it anymore. I want to grow what we can grow on the water that's ours and raise my kid." He didn't finish the last of it, *and not spend my life like you did*, but it wasn't cruel this time, only true, laid down the way Dwight had laid his down in this same yard.

Cal signed at the kitchen table in October with Joan as witness and the baby asleep in the next room. He kept the home block and the house and the senior water and his grandfather's lateral to carry it. He pulled the dead grafted trees himself that winter, alone, with the old crawler, taking his time, not stacking them in windrows the way the outfit had stacked Dwight's but pulling them one at a time and laying each one down, because he had put them in the ground with his son on the strength of a hope a machine had handed them, and he felt he owed them his own two hands going out.

TWENTY

He went down to the river with her for the first time that winter, after the papers were signed, on a cold bright Sunday, because he could not think of a reason not to anymore and because he wanted to be where she was.

There were four of them on the gravel that morning, Della and Pearl on her stool and a man Cal didn't know and Joan. Joan handed him a hand rake without ceremony and showed him the work, loosening the cobble so the fine silt would carry off in what little flow there was, the way the bulletin had said once, the bulletin nobody printed now. His hands were clumsy at it. Hers were not.

He worked beside her a while in the cold. Down the bar Della counted under her breath and Pearl ran on about her daughter-in-law and the thermos went around. After a time Cal said the thing he had wondered for two years and never asked. "Why do you come down here, Joanie. You don't believe it. I know you don't."

She didn't stop working. "No. I don't believe it tends anything. I don't believe there's anybody to thank." She worked a stone loose and set it back clean. "I spent three years glad about this water and a year sick about it, and both of those were about what it was doing to us. What it was deciding for us." She sat back on her heels and looked at the low river going by. "This is the one thing I do for the river that isn't about us. Nobody grades it. It doesn't pay. The fish mostly don't come anymore. I put my hands in the cold and I clean off a few stones, and for an hour the water isn't a thing being done to me." She went back to the gravel. "You spent your whole life fighting over who the water was for. I got tired of the question. So I come down and tend it and I don't ask who it's for."

Cal worked beside her in the cold and didn't say anything, and after a while he found the rhythm of the thing, the loosening and the letting go, and his hands warmed to it.

TWENTY-ONE

Four years on, Cal walked the canal road before the sun was up, the way he had most mornings of his life, and stopped at the headgate above the home block to look at the water.

It was low. It would be lower by August. The transfer ran now, the great pipe over the Colockum carrying the river east to the flats, and in the dry months the Wenatchee below the diversion went to a thread. The senior water still came down his grandfather's lateral to the home block, to the pears and the Galas, a small crop off small ground, enough. He had mostly stopped doing the arithmetic that proved it could not last. It lasted from one year to the next, which was all anything did.

He could see them from the gate in the gray light, down on the river. Della's people, fewer now, four or five, old most of them, out on the gravel tending a reach the model had named for three years and forgotten for four, holding to targets from a bulletin no one issued anymore. Joan was among them this morning, one bent shape over the low water. He had gone down himself a few times by now, not believing any of it, keeping her company, which turned out to be reason enough.

He had June with him this morning. She was four, in her boots and her coat, and she had wanted to come, and he had brought her up the road in the dark holding her hand.

"That's the gate," she said. "That lets the water in our ditch."

"That's the gate. Your great-great-grandfather dug that ditch. With horses."

"Why are those people standing in the river."

He looked down at the small bent shapes in the cold light, his wife among them, keeping faith with water that was gone.

"They're taking care of it," he said.

She had already let go of the question the way children do and crouched at the edge of the canal to put her hand in the water coming down the lateral, and Cal crouched beside her, and she pulled her hand back and looked at him with her eyes gone wide.

"It's cold," she said.

"That's the snow." He put his own hand in beside hers, the senior water, the cold of the mountain that nobody had chosen to send them and nobody could choose to take away. "That's just the mountain coming down to us."

She put her hand back in beside his. The river went on past the gate, low, on its way to the sea the way it had before any of them and would after. He did not tell her the rest of it. There would be time, or there would not. The two of them crouched at the gate with their hands in the cold water, and he let it be enough.