

Sanctum

ROBERT McGUILL

*The places where water comes together
with other water. Those places stand out
in my mind like holy places.*

- Raymond Carver

Water. Crashing. Thundering down the boulders. Beating against the cold, stone hearts of the rocks. And for what? They don't listen. They don't care. They have their reasons for holding on to Caroline and they keep them a secret from the living.

Robbie doesn't know how can she stand it. The sound of the water in her ears. Day and night. The pleas of the eager, angry current, begging the rocks to let her go, to release their grip on her frail, young body. He doesn't know how anyone could stand something like that. That awful and insistent.

"Are you listening, you little shithead?"

Robbie snaps around and catches Rusty raking him with one of his hardass looks. But it doesn't work this time. The goggles Rusty's wearing make him look stupid instead of tough. The snorkel and hockey helmet don't help either, which he'd know if he saw himself in a mirror.

Rusty lifts a hand to cuff him one, but Robbie knows he's bluffing. It's a brother thing. Rusty's always threatening to smack him down. Give him one "just because."

"Pay attention, dude!" Rusty shouts, bending into the words, forc-

ing his voice to penetrate the sound of the water. "This is important. Let's hear you say it! Again! "

Robbie straightens his back and peers down into the current. It's clocking in at seven hundred cubic feet per second. Down from the twenty-two hundred it had been a month ago. But jumping into it was still going to be tricky. Like stepping in front of the worst wind you'd ever imagined. Opening your jacket in the face of a nasty Chinook, and getting blown over in a single gust.

"But I already know it!" Robbie squawks, his voice rising like a magpie's.

"You don't know jack shit," Rusty shouts back. "Let's hear it. Now!"

Rusty's stripped down to his khaki cargo shorts. He's standing there like Tarzan. Washboard ribs, flat gut. Skinny brown frame. There's a thick rope knotted around his midsection, and the goggles and snorkel and crazy black flippers make him like one of those crank-bait lures they sell in Gibson's sporting goods store back in Cañon City.

"One tug?" Rusty says with an impatient roll of the hand to get Robbie started. He pauses. Folds his arms and waits. "Come on, man! One tug means what?"

Robbie slumps like, *Jeez! Again?* He's got the fucker memorized, okay? He knows the whole routine by heart. It just takes him a second to remember.

One tug, he lets out rope. Two tugs, he takes up the slack. Three tugs means Rusty's got her, and it's time to haul in.

"One—"

He stops and cranes his neck, looking up the stone embankment, thinking he heard something. He's nervous about the stunt, skittish,

and it shows in his red, wind-chapped face. But he turns back to Rusty and continues on with the forced recitation. “One, I let out more rope...two, I take up the slack—“

They’ve been watching the runoff flow for weeks, him and Rusty. Waiting for the exact right time to make their move. They’ve been checking the paper, listening to the radio. Hanging around old man Silva’s fly shop, the Angler’s Paradise, eavesdropping on the old heads who work behind the sales counter and who know every last run and oxbow of the river.

Last night’s paper said the flow would ease today, and that’s what the boys have been counting on. Something under 1,000 cfs. They’ve been planning this little recovery operation of theirs for more than a month now, and when they’d seen that the river was going to be down they gathered their gear, stashed it in the garage, and waited for their folks to go to work.

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“It’s gonna be wicked down there.” Rusty points to the foaming white water. “So pay attention. You hear me? I need you to be sharp.”

Robbie nods. He’s heard all this before and he knows what to do. He just wants to get it on and get it over with before someone catches them. He’s not afraid of much, anymore, after all their family’s gone through since Caroline’s death. But he is afraid of getting caught. Especially because of what it would do to his folks. He twitches a little when he hears a truck growl, pulling its way up the grade, and when he checks to see if anything’s coming, Rusty jumps all over him.

“Quit your goddamn worrying, man!” Rusty lifts the goggles and shows his war face. “It’s gonna be okay. Everything’s gonna be okay, you

hear me? We're gonna get her out. We're gonna settle this damn thing once and for all."

It's their sister, Caroline, who's down there under the current, and she's been trapped in the underwater cave for *three months* now. Yeah. Three months. Try saying that to yourself and believing it! A girl, your sister, trapped in an underwater cave for three months, while up here on dry land life skips along like everything's sunshine and daisies. No matter how you come at it, no matter how you take it apart in your head, it just doesn't make sense. Nothing about it makes sense. A young girl falls out of a raft, drowns, gets trapped in an underwater cave, and even though everybody knows about it, nobody does anything? Come on!

* * *

For Robbie, the picture of his sister thrashing around down there, pressed against the trapped debris of willow branches and dead leaves is almost too much to bear. But he sucks it up and grits his teeth and tries not to complain because he knows that's the grown-up thing to do. What he's doing right now is exactly what Caroline would have done for him, no questions asked. So it's only fair.

The brothers are sick of hearing other people, people who don't know her, talk about their sister. Which is part of the reason they're doing this thing. What they've learned over the last three months is that you can't drown in a public place like the Arkansas River and not have people jaw about it—in this case, total strangers talking about how Caroline's body should be recovered—and that, if you want to shut them up, you have to take matters into your own hands.

Between the news reports they've heard and their parents' hushed conversations, the boys have learned more than they ever wanted to

about their sister's predicament. But even if they'd gone around with blinders on and wax in their ears they couldn't have avoided everything. It just wasn't possible. Their buddies at school would have filled them in. Or they would have heard it from other kids' parents. Or they would have read about it online somewhere, like the library. It was big news, their sister's drowning. It had caused problems for the whole community, so wherever you went, wherever people gossiped, you always overheard something.

* * *

"It's good it's us doing this," Rusty says. "We're her brothers." He pauses for a second. Gives Robbie a crooked smile. "Blood's thicker than water. Right?"

Robbie imagines his sister down there in the cave, eyes open, teeth bared, floating like a rag doll who's been abandoned by some spoiled child. Arms churning. Hands flung wide in a macabre dance of loneliness. He can't help wondering if Rusty will be tough enough to go through with the scheme when he finally gets down there and sees her. Whether he'll be able to put his arms around her like she wants him to? Or whether he'll have to close his eyes to even dare to touch her?

Robbie shivers and grits his teeth to make the picture go away. He needs to do like Rusty says and stay focused.

Somewhere up the canyon another car engine grumbles, and Robbie glances over his shoulder again. They don't need any rubber-neckers pulling off the highway and snooping around. The worst thing that could happen now would be getting caught, though Robbie knows he probably worries about this more than necessary. If him and Rusty get busted trying to pull this off, their mom and dad won't care whether

their hearts were in the right place or not. They'll ground them for the rest of their lives. Put them on permanent restriction, and make them clean the garage every Sunday until they're thirty.

* * *

Caroline is eighteen. Or was. Robbie isn't sure which is correct anymore, given the fact that Caroline hasn't been laid in the ground or had a proper funeral yet. She's three years older than Rusty. Six years older than himself. But he's thought about this while lying awake in bed at night the past three months, and it's come to him that one day he'll catch up, and surpass her in age. Which seems crazy in and of itself. Stupid crazy, in fact, when he imagines that someday he'll be an old man and his dead sister, who's older than him, will be in the bloom of her youth. Younger, always, than he'll be, and innocent of all the sins that make old people ugly and selfish.

Caroline was pitched into the Frog Rock rapid on a Sunday morning. Her raft hit a twist in the river and high-sided, flicking her into the boiling waters like she was somebody's discarded cigarette. A second person toppled in after her. This guy from Texas. A school teacher who couldn't even swim, but lived somehow because he was washed around the other side of the rock. Saved by a turn in the current and rescued at the place where the two channels came together again in a single stream.

It's weird when Robbie thinks about it. Infuriating, in a lot of ways. A stone no bigger than a car deciding the futures of two strangers sharing the same raft? How can fate be so black and white? So fickle? So cut and dried in its pronouncements? His head throbs when he thinks about it, about the way things turned out, but he's stopped try-

ing to find answers, because he knows he'll never get them. The river is silent. And so are the rocks. Death presides over one side of the water, life over the other, and there will never be anything in-between to explain the difference.

Despite what their pastor, Reverend Hollister, said about God and His mysteries in the service following their sister's drowning, Caroline's punishment seems both unfair and unjust, particularly given the innocent nature of her trespass. Death for taking the wrong turn around a waterbound stone? Really? *Really?* Rusty bawls Robbie out whenever Robbie mentions this to him, but Robbie can't help it. The two of them have lain in bed too many nights and talked about it too many times for it not to make him angry. Robbie doesn't like the Reverend Hollister anymore, and thinks maybe he's full of shit. He thinks maybe God's full of shit, too, but he's too scared to say so aloud. Even to Rusty.

* * *

The boys' home is up the river in the little town of Buena Vista, two miles from the rapids. A red, brick rancher sitting on five wind-burned acres of land. Their dad works for the resort at Monarch Mountain as a ski instructor, and their mom's a substitute teacher at Ronald Reagan Middle School. Their folks are quiet people who nobody ever talked about until the accident. Now they're like the second-rate celebrities you see on Entertainment Tonight. Always having to wear sunglasses, and suffer the notion that whenever they open a door, a camera or a microphone might pop in their faces.

In Bueny (that's what everybody calls the town), you can find rack brochures in all the gas stations and restaurants welcoming river rafters. Encouraging them to *ride the wild river* down to the Royal Gorge.

Rafters are a common sight during the summertime—big money for the local economy—and flotillas of them can be seen drifting down the Arkansas from spring to fall, alive with thrill-seekers from all over the country. It's big business, rafting. A happy business filled with rowdy, high-spirited people, which is part of the reason Caroline wanted to work for one after she graduated from high school. With tips, she could make some nice pocket change to take with her when went off to college in the fall. On top of that she could stay in shape and get a nice tan. So why not, right?

The rack brochures tell about the place where Caroline died, though to be fair, they were written long before the water swept her to her grave. They describe it like this:

A moderate gradient that offers good boating for the beginner to the intermediate. The journey is highlighted by pulse-jumping jaunts around Little Seidel's, Frog Rock, and House Rock.

Pulse-jumping jaunts. Robbie will remember those words for the rest of his life. Every time he hears them—from now until the day he takes his last breath—it will remind him of the place where Caroline took hers. The place where she drowned and the school teacher lived. Where she was trapped for three months in an underground cave, pinned to a stone sieve clogged with sticks and leaves and empty beer cans and used rubbers and plastic soda bottles while people who never knew the first thing about her fought tooth and claw over the “correct” way to bring her home.

* * *

A man from the Arkansas River Guardians, Mr. Skelton, told the newspapers, “In twenty years of rangering, I've never left anyone in the

water. We'll get Caroline out. We just need time. We need to do it the right way."

All of them—the would-be rescuers—use her name, "Caroline," when they speak of her. They're always respectful, even when they're quoted in the paper or interviewed on the evening news. They never say "the body." They always say "Caroline." As in, "We're working as hard as we can to bring Caroline home."

One of the so-called experts brought in to help with the recovery operation claimed it was going to take heavy equipment and major deconstruction of the riverbed to free Caroline. He said it was going to take a temporary cofferdam made of cement barriers—the kind they have in front of the White House to discourage suicide bombers—to divert the water and clear a big deep channel away from the cave where she's trapped. But then that opened up other concerns by other groups. "Ethical" issues, the paper called them. Like whether or not the rapids ought to be changed, permanently, so no one ever drowned in that spot again.

Mr. Skelton said, "Yes, certainly," when they asked him about altering the course of the river. "Of course I've thought about it. A change like that would make everyone's life more pleasant. Mine included." But then he added, "As tempting as the thought is, though, we can't allow expediency to guide the decision making. Changing wild places is no small thing. I understand the family's desire to get their daughter back, but to effect permanent change on the environment is, well, a *slippery* precedent."

Red tape. By the end of the first week of her death, Caroline was as much a hostage to bureaucracy as she was to the underwater sieve.

The Bureau of Land Management played a part in her captivity, and so did the Forest Service. They said studies would have to be done before the river could be touched. That environmental impact reports would have to be filed. That facts regarding the disruption of wild habitats would have to be weighed and measured before any concrete action could be decided upon. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers also joined the discussion. But theirs was to make the point that even if the BLM and the Forest Service *did* agree on a plan, any and all approvals to touch the river would still be under their jurisdiction.

These groups tore at one another in the various media, and while they went back and forth, firing their territorial potshots at one another, a new expert, this one a river engineer, was interviewed by telephone from a news bureau in Pueblo. He was Harlan Purdy, a man who made his living building whitewater parks. "What do I think?" Purdy said to the reporter after calling the debate on both sides *dubious*. "I think it's going to make a helluva disturbance going in there to recover Caroline either way. So why put the rapid back the way it is now? The impact's already there. Why not deepen the opposite channel to allow easier navigation in low water? That way future rafters can avoid the deadly sieve."

People agreed, Purdy had a point. But having a point wasn't the issue anymore. Everybody involved had a point, and everybody's point made good, practical sense in one way or another. The problem wasn't which solution was *correct*. It was which solution was *actionable*. What they needed here was to agree on something—*anything*—and then get off their asses and do it. Purdy's opinion, for all it was worth, did nothing more than deepen the argument, exacerbating the recovery and frustrating all involved.

* * *

And yet, *what if?*

What if Purdy was the rightest of right among them? And what if the impact to the river was already there, no matter which tack was taken to recover Caroline? What then? What would happen if they *did* divert the water?

What if?

One word. *Lawsuits.*

Purdy's thoughts were barely raised by the media before people started waving summonses and subpoenas under one another's noses. There were a number of folks out there who believed that messing with a river in any way was a sacrilege, and the moment Mr. Purdy's argument took its first breath, injunctions were filed against all of the state agencies, in an attempt to smother it.

An eco-lawyer was hired out of Denver to make certain no one changed the river's natural course without "prolonged and meaningful public debate," and this same lawyer used his celebrity with the media to enlarge on newer, and even more complicated matters.

"If officials make changes to the river," the lawyer, Walter Cambridge, Esq. argued, "they could be responsible for future incidents at Frog Rock. And does anyone really want that?"

Cambridge, dressed in a neatly-tailored charcoal-colored suit and red silk tie, sat behind his heavy desk, the solemn backdrop of black and gold law books stacked like bullion on the mahogany shelves behind him.

"Where would such behavior stop?" he asked, eyebrows rising as if the answer to the question were too frightening to even imagine.

“With changes to riverbeds—as Mr. Purdy knows from designing whitewater parks—municipalities are forced to assume certain legal responsibilities —the same way they do for ball fields and playgrounds.

“Wild rivers are protected from liability involving injuries by a natural feature. But once you alter them, you create grounds for potential legal action.” He smiled, thoughtfully, after he’d finished saying this and looked directly into the camera. Confident, pleased with himself.

* * *

What nobody really talked about until Caroline died is the odd stretch of water that leads up to, and around, the Frog Rock. Frog Rock is a Class III rapids, and a Class III rapids is supposed to be navigable by beginners and intermediates like the brochures say. It’s supposed to have a different risk level than a Class V, for example, where rafters know, and accept, the danger they’re facing. But Frog Rock has that one bad turn. A killer turn where even a reasonably decent river runner like Caroline could get into trouble. Should they alter the river, as Mr. Purdy suggested, and make the channel more compatible with the Class III rating? Despite the legal repercussions? Mr. Skelton, the River Ranger, didn’t think so.

“If you start adjusting things, or treating the rapids like it’s a carnival ride at Elitch Gardens,” Skelton warned, “it might encourage reckless behavior, and possibly more deaths. It goes beyond municipal accountability. I’d hate to give *anyone* the impression that *any* spot on the river is safe. I don’t even like to *use* that word. *Safe*. To me, it’s either *more* hazardous or *less* hazardous. Period.”

Mr. Skelton was right about the river giving people the wrong impression. Frog Rock rapids can look friendly. Almost inviting. There’s

whitewater, but it isn't like the Class V whitewater that runs through the canyon further south into the Gorge. Down there the waves leap and chop and lunge at you like tortured souls in a watery hell. It's easy to see how people get thrown from their rafts down there, what with the waves slapping and pounding against the sharp granite canyon walls. You take a spill there and the only way out is a pair of wings because you're looking at a sheer rock face, taller than the Statue of Liberty. Class IIIs aren't supposed to be like that. They're supposed to be fun, *pulse-jumping little jaunts*.

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One of the river rangers noted that Caroline was wearing a life jacket but no helmet when she fell in. Which sounded like Caroline, who loved to goof around and pretend she was Paris Hilton or Kourtney Kardashian. She liked to dance and toss her hair the way she saw models do on TV. Pose for their dad's video camera, or take pictures of herself on her cell phone and email them to her friends. Her hair was brown and shiny—the color of the acorns that fell from the gambol oaks in the foothills—and she didn't like covering it up if she didn't have to. It's one of the things Robbie remembers best about her.

Rusty says Caroline was stupid not to wear any headgear when she went out that day, and to prove he isn't stupid too, he's wearing his hockey helmet. Protection against any and all underwater hazards. Including rocks. He raps its hard shell with his knuckles to demonstrate its toughness. "See," he says to Robbie. "This is the way to do it."

Robbie nods, like, *yeah, yeah*. But he doesn't hold with Rusty calling their dead sister stupid, and when Rusty turns his back he mumbles, "You look like a fucking retard."

Rusty hands Robbie the loose end of the rope. The one Robbie's supposed to hold onto while the operation's in progress. When Robbie's got the braided line in his fists, Rusty tugs at the knot to make sure it's good and tight. Then he takes a few quick breaths to get himself ready. He does a couple of deep knee bends for good measure, and shakes his head. Then he struts around in a circle, flexing and rolling his shoulders like a guy on ESPN warming up for a big game.

"I'm there, man," he says with firm nod. "I'm ready."

Robbie watches him, unsure, his stomach is rising and falling in slow, unsettling waves now. A sour bilge sloshing at the back of his throat. He feels like he might get sick. Blow chunks all over the stones at his feet if he isn't careful. So he looks at the rope in his hand, tightens his fingers around it, and says to himself, "Focus. Focus."

Another truck growls, straining up the grade. He looks up at the guardrail that blocks the highway from view.

"Maybe we shouldn't be doing this."

"What?"

"Maybe—"

Rusty kills him with a look.

"What if we get caught?" he says, admitting to the fear that's been eating at him since they got here. Tears come to his eyes, and he looks away before Rusty can see them. His gaze collapses. Falls to the rocks under his feet and the few thin blades of grass struggling to see the sun before the canyon walls blot it from the afternoon sky. "Maybe we should just go home."

"Home?" Rusty sneers. "Home!" He clamps his hands on his scrawny hips. "And forget about our sister?"

"I didn't mean it like that."

"Oh, yeah? Well, how did you mean it?"

"It's just that—"

"Look," Rusty interrupts, impatience hurrying his words along.

"Enough, all right? Carrie's been down there three months. Three freakin months! You can't go three minutes in the dark without crying about it to mom and dad. But you're telling me it's okay to leave our sister down there? Alone in that cave? All by herself until some stranger decides it's all right to bring her up? Is that what you're telling me?"

* * *

Robbie breaks down. He's been trying to hold it all back, but when he thinks about Carrie and what she must look like after all this time in the underwater cave, he starts in blubbering. Choking himself with tears. He's scared to death, and he doesn't know what to do, or what to say. But he knows this is wrong and that Rusty's wrong for having talked him into coming along. He's in pieces over Caroline. Devastated. Heart-broken, though he can't imagine ever saying those words aloud without being laughed at. He's been doing his best to hold it all together, to keep his feelings in check, but he cracks now because he knows Rusty is going to be sorry, too, in ways he never imagined, when he comes face to face with her.

"Jesus Christ," Rusty sighs, when he sees the kid's tears. "Not *that*. Come on." He takes an awkward step in his flippers. Cups his diving mask with both hands and pulls it away from his face again, the suction from the rubber seal leaving a silly-looking red rim around his nose and forehead. He puts his arm around Robbie. Pats his back. A gesture so kind, so unlikely, coming as it does from a brother, that it makes the boy weep even harder.

"Come on, come on," Rusty says, his own voice cracking. "Don't crater on me, kid. Not now. I need you to stay strong."

Robbie struggles to contain his tears, wishing he were as brave as Rusty. Even half as brave. Rusty has nerves of steel, which he proved the night he sat in their room and declared he was sick of seeing their mom and dad cry. He said there wouldn't be any more waiting around, and he meant it. He said if nobody else had the guts to pull their sister out of that dark black hole, then by God, he'd do it himself. Without looking back. Without a second thought. Robbie knew Rusty was telling the truth when he said that. But he also knew that, even though Rusty was tough, the rapid here at Frog Rock was tougher, and that if something went wrong, Rusty could die, too.

"I miss Carrie," the boy sobs, his small voice going to pieces in the din of rushing water. "I miss her lots."

Rusty looks at him and draws a breath. Clenches his teeth and turns away, blinking. "I do, too," he says, "I do, too."

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A moment passes while the two boys hold one another. Then Rusty releases Robbie, and steps toward the water, his flippers slapping against the stones. Robbie draws his sleeve across his eyes, feeling better, somehow, but still unable to shake the feeling that they're going to get nabbed trying to carry out this crazy stunt, and that they're both going to get dragged home in the back of a squad car.

Robbie hates what Caroline's death has done to him and his family, and he wants the drama over as badly as Rusty does. But he doesn't want to screw up here. He doesn't want to get caught breaking the law and making his folks feel even worse than they already do. Only it's all

starting to crowd in on him. The water. The news reports. The government agents. And what if he and Rusty succeed in getting her out? What then? That could be even worse than failing, couldn't it? He's trying to picture himself hauling on the rope, pulling Rusty and Caroline to the surface. Seeing his dead sister's waterlogged face. They brought an old blanket along to wrap her in—it's lying on the rocks—but Robbie can't get past the terror of what Caroline might look like after three months in the river. Bad things happen to a person's body when they drown. It said so in an article on the internet. So what happens to someone who's been bashed around in an underwater cave for a hundred days? What becomes of them after all that time?

Rusty's got some of their mom's old pantyhose stuffed in the cargo pockets of his shorts, and he says he's going to cover Caroline's body with them before he brings her up. That way everything should stay in place, where it belongs. No accidents or surprises. Robbie doesn't say anything when Rusty tells him this because the picture it conjures up is too terrible to even imagine.

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Robbie remembers the day him and Rusty pedaled down here after Caroline drowned. How they'd laid their bikes on the gravel shoulder, on the other side of the guardrail, and climbed down the rocky escarpment and stood before the water. Robbie remembers looking down into the bright, clear current trying to see Caroline's face. But it wasn't there. There was nothing but water. Water and stones, and a handful of half-submerged dog tracks, left in the shallows by the K9 rescue team. A few nights after that somber reckoning, a man from the Division of Wildlife was interviewed on the ten o'clock news. He was one of

the first to talk about the “problems” associated with the recovery of Caroline’s body. He said like everybody else, he wanted Caroline to be brought home. Laid to rest as she should be. But he also cautioned that the river was a living habitat, not a tomb, and that any disruption to the natural flow of the water could mean disaster for the river’s brown trout population.

When their mother heard that ridiculous tidbit of news she groaned as if she’d been shot through the heart with an arrow. She shouted at their dad to turn it off! Shut the damn thing off, or I’ll throw a brick through it! She’d heard enough.

Nobody’s talked about the fish since then, but Robbie thinks about them all the time when he’s in bed at night, in the dark. He remembers when his folks took him to the zoo in Colorado Springs one summer, and how, in the Grizzly Bear exhibit, there was this place, a cave like the one Caroline’s in, where you could walk in and observe the bears paddling around in the water, clear as day. There were trout in that water, too. Everywhere. And they darted about, not even afraid to be in the same pond as a creature who, the moment it served his purposes, would look on them as its next meal. The trout in the zoo were rainbow, not browns. But still. You could stand right next to the big glass picture window and watch them swim. See them just like Carrie would be seeing them, right now, if she were still alive.

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“Let’s go,” Rusty says, tugging at the rope in Robbie’s hands.
“Come on.”

He turns and walks toward the water, flippers clapping against the stones. He wades in up to his knees, the current swirling around

his stick legs, and he lets out a great big whoop and shouts, “Man, this bitch is co-old!” He grins and gives Robbie the thumbs up with both hands, then takes another step.

The last word either of the boys had heard on the matter of their sister’s recovery came two days ago from Snooks Pribble, who owns the Arkansas Raft Adventures, and who was Caroline’s boss. Snooks had heard the same arguments as Robbie and Rusty’s family over the past three months. But like them, he wasn’t moved. “Who gives a damn about what the government wants,” he said when they interviewed him on the radio. “We’re talking about a family here. A family who deserves closure. All I want is to see is that these good people get their daughter back.”

Their mom appreciated those words. Especially coming from Snooks, who she and their dad knew, socially, but had never really been friends with. She hated the thought that tourists still rafted over the water where Caroline was trapped, and had resented Snooks for keeping his business open while her daughter was lost in the river’s embrace. But when the grizzled old timer said what he said, she calmed a little, admitting that having rafts float over Caroline’s body probably wasn’t all that different than when ordinary people stroll through a cemetery.

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When Rusty’s waist deep in the thundering current, Robbie expects him to turn and wave goodbye. Salute or something. But he doesn’t. He’s oddly still for a moment, and then his back muscles go wide and tight like a bird’s when it spreads its wings just before taking flight, and the next thing Robbie knows Rusty’s diving into the current.

Robbie sees his brother's head go under first. Then his legs. Then the flippers. The water breaks a moment later, and a spout from the snorkel sprays a fine mist of cold water into the air. But then Rusty's gone again. Just like that. Just like Caroline.

The rope passes through Robbie's hands, its rough braid scratching his palms, and he's terrified. But he knows that if they pull this off, they'll be heroes. They'll have done what the grownups should have done but were too busy bickering about to actually accomplish. He doesn't feel good, exactly. But he doesn't feel bad, either. Not until he hears the voice up at the guardrail, and turns and sees the game warden in the forest service uniform looking down at him through a pair of flashing dark glasses.

"Whatcha doin down there, son?"

The frayed rope-end drops from Robbie's hands. Guilt is written all over his face, and though he can't see the man's eyes, he's sure the man can read his. "What?"

"I said whatcha doing down there?"

The game warden, a youngish man, Hispanic, swings his uniformed leg and shiny black boots over the guardrail, and as he looks down to secure his footing, Robbie searches for the fallen rope-end, which is edging into the water.

"Your folks here with you?"

Robbie looks up at the man, shakes his head.

"Everything all right?"

Robbie nods, furiously.

"Then I think you'd better come on up here," the game warden says, adjusting his olive-colored ranger hat with its Montana Peak crease. "That's not a place for kids down there. It's dangerous water."

Robbie looks back at the river and the rope is gone. Vanished in the current.

“Come on, son,” the game warden says, gesturing with his hand. He tries not to shout or sound overly concerned, but at the same time he makes sure Robbie understands he means business.

Robbie turns from him, feeling the pull of the water, the tug of his brother and sister calling. Shouting, *Robbie! Don't leave us!* And he doesn't know what to do. The game warden has his hand out, beckoning him, trying to save him from himself. But the murmur of his own blood, which is thicker than water, drowns the man's voice. ▣