

CHAPTER 7

A river is an illusion: a wide, glittering path that winds peacefully between cottonwood trees and concrete, flowing by homes, farms, and factories. Sunlight dances and the river's rich hues shift over the day, gradually dimming until city lights shimmer. The human body is 60 percent water. We are inevitably drawn to the river; it tugs at us subliminally. It pulls at us like an ancient umbilical. We seek solace on its banks. We dream and make love there; we marry there. The river's tranquil surface suggests that an idyllic truce lives between it and us, and that all is well. But the mirror hides much and we give little thought to what lies beneath.

Like most major American rivers, the Willamette River is a toilet. Cities continually dump their industrial waste and raw sewage into its waters. Herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers, from cul-de-sacs to corporate mega-farms, merge with the effluent from the Portland Harbor Superfund site and the EPA's mixing zones to turn the river to poison. The Willamette joins the Columbia River, which is already burdened with upstream pollution and radioactive seepage from the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, still more cities join in the travesty, and finally at the Columbia's mouth (although this seems like the wrong body part), this mega-spill enters the Pacific Ocean. This dumping

occurs continually, 24 hours a day, every day. In the Pacific, pollution from the Columbia and other rivers are thought to be contributing to massive dead zones just off the Oregon coast. As the name implies, they are lifeless. (A similar 7,000 square mile dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico originates at the mouth of the Mississippi.)

Ryan had taken his first professional job at DEQ. Given the title Environmental Engineer and flush with enthusiasm, he had intended to help clean up the Willamette. He quickly learned, however, that the DEQ was a permitting agency. Its purpose: to grant permits for polluters to keep polluting. And on this winter morning, Ryan was writing more permits. At the top of the heap was the application from Regal West, a paper mill. Ryan found that daily, Regal West was dumping thousands of gallons of untreated wastewater into the river. A two-foot wide pipe, painted a harmonious green, exited Regal's plant and ran straight into the water. Regal's expectation was to simply renew permits. But Ryan's proposal, nearly complete, would force Regal to install a million dollars worth of equipment to clean up their wastewater. Ryan knew it would likely never fly; DEQ would veto it and Regal would never see it. He had done this before with other applications, challenging with technicalities and questioning DEQ's own proscribed limits. On two occasions, Gabe Riplinger had supported Ryan, and on these two, Ryan had won out. But Gabe was his only ally and Gabe was about to leave.



Monday morning, the offices filled quietly. Stu could be heard over the wall, sharing his stock market wisdom with a broker.

Ryan was consumed with Regal West, updating information and checking calculations. Karina caught him glued to his monitor.

“You’re quiet this morning,” she said.

“Hey. Busy.”

“Did you like Friday’s party?”

Ryan looked up and smiled. “It was great. Gabe enjoyed it.”

“He seemed to. Evelyn had fun putting it together.”

“You helped.”

Karina nodded to the stacks of paper. “So when is the big day?”

“Friday.” Ryan pushed away from the monitor. “Regal goes up for review Friday.”

“And are you going to be bad?”

“Very.”

Karina grinned broadly. “Sounds like you have an attitude, Mr. Evans. You get all the big ones. You got Justene. You got Wilkins-Simpson down in Albany. And Regal.”

Ryan’s head shook. “No. In fact, they’ve wised up. The next two projects are small. An old dry-cleaning place on the west side. A closed school out in Gresham with a buried heating tank.”

“You think it’s the penalty of doing the job too well?” Karina asked.

“I can only wonder. And of course, months have gone by and they still haven’t rejected Justene.”

Karina nodded. “I know.”

“I mean, what the hell is the hold-up? They’ve taken forever. Gabe is leaving. I don’t like it.”

Karina flipped her red hair back and narrowed her eyes. “Maybe they’re waiting for the protestors to tire out and leave town.” Her face took a mischievous smile. “Or maybe, just maybe it’s a conspiracy.”

Ryan wasn’t amused. “It doesn’t smell right.”

“I prefer conspiracy. You doing lunch with us at Benny’s?”

The group—Karina, Tommy, Ryan, and whoever else joined—sometimes took lunch at Benny’s Deli across the street.

Ryan’s head shook. “I’m chained.”

She turned away, smiling, but with her head shaking. “You’re a sick puppy, Mr. Evans. Do you know you’re compulsive?”

“Yes I do. It’s a habit.”



At 10:00, Ryan heard the whoosh of clothing. He knew the sound. It was Evelyn in her silk dress.

“Have you heard from Gabe?” she asked.

“Not since Friday. He didn’t come in?”

“No.” Her voice had a rare tinge of worry.

“Maybe he had an appointment,” Ryan offered.

“No. He always calls if he’s not going to be in.”

“Did you call his house?”

“I saw him Saturday. We had dinner, but he didn’t answer the phone all day Sunday and doesn’t answer now.”

Ryan thought. “Maybe he had one last vacation day?”

Evelyn red lips pursed together, her face skeptical. “I don’t think so, but I’ll check.”

She turned and rushed down the aisle with her dress swooshing behind her.

Evelyn lived alone. With no family nearby, she filled much of her spare time singing in a Lutheran church choir and frequenting the Portland Opera with a small circle of single, middle-aged women.

She returned after a few minutes, out of breath. “Gabe is supposed to be here. He has appointments here this afternoon. He

always calls me if he's going to be late, but he doesn't answer his phone now and he didn't answer all day yesterday."

"Have you tried his cell?"

"He doesn't have one."

Ryan frowned.

She persisted. "Could you drive over there and check on him? That or we need to call the police."

Gabe's home was a 30-minute drive. He had no family nearby, only a sister in Minneapolis. "What does Mr. Lochner think?" Ryan asked.

"He's out of town."

Ryan eyed the stack of papers around him. "Okay, all right. I'll drive over. I'm sure he's fine."

"Thank you, Ryan! I'll go with you."

Ryan found the offer surprising. "That's all right, Evelyn. Don't worry. I'll be back after lunch."



The International truck banged and rattled through the parking garage. Outside, dark clouds were piling in from the coast. Ryan took Route 30 northwest through an industrial area populated with long-haul trucking, shipping transfer companies, and a rail line. Large trucks crowded the road.

After ten minutes, the route opened up to 50 miles per hour and businesses gave way to rolling fields and small dairy farms. Another mile and he passed the bridge to Sauvie Island. Home to farms, the island was an oasis close to the city that offered produce of all kinds in the summer and pumpkins in the fall. Pearson's Marina appeared on the right. The memories rolled by in glimpses. One distant summer when Ryan was ten years old, his father had traded an old broken-down truck for an older sailboat and moored it at Pearson's. For one season, the two had battled the Gorge winds and learned how to sail the 26-foot

Catalina. A lack of money and frequent repairs had forced its sale.

Scappoose was a small rural community, with older homes spread out across rolling hills. There was no real downtown, only a gas station, BJ's restaurant, and a state police station. A new Safeway store nearby provided a landmark for the town. Ryan turned left at BJ's. He and Gabe had once eaten breakfast there, early on a Saturday morning before heading to the river to fish. Another mile and a series of turns delivered him to Forsythe Road, atop the hill. The white farmhouse appeared on the left.

A cedar rail fence bordered the front of the property. The house sat well back from the road and Ryan eased in and parked under the elm trees, next to Gabe's green Jeep. Two Oregonian newspapers lay in plastic bags in the driveway. He stepped out.

The house was dark. On the front porch, as if hiding from the rain, sat a large ceramic frog. A wooden swing hung from porch rafters and moved slightly in the breeze. Ryan climbed the steps and rapped the door with its brass knocker. Inside, Gabe's retriever, Shakespeare, began barking immediately. Through the bay window, yellow light shown dimly from the back. Ryan could see the outline of the interior he knew well. He tried the door again and the dog emitted a low howl.

He stepped off the porch and slogged through the wet grass and around the side of the home. Various massive bushes bordered the house, 30 years of plantings by a childless couple. Ryan ignored the stone path and wedged through the wet shrubs and up to the back porch, banging his head on a humming bird feeder. Water soaked his jeans. He pounded on the back door with his fists and called out.

The deep backyard extended down to a building on the right, which contained a garage and Gabe's shop. To the left, a white barn was set back from the yard. Apple trees bordered the fence and beyond that, pasture. Gabe's two quarter horses, large dark animals, stood nervously at the fence in the rain. It was an odd thing. They should have been stabled.

THE MINE

Once more around the house, Ryan searched for a way in. There was no key under the mats, no key in the frog in front or the wooden raccoons in back. The wind picked up and rain began to fall in earnest. He returned hurriedly to the back yard. Gabe had offered more than once to give him a key and now, Ryan regretted having refused it. The horses stood in the increasing deluge. Their dark bodies twitched.

The black line of the garage door caught his eye. The side door was 15 yards away. He moved closer as a sharp gust pushed cold rain down his neck and back. The door was open, just a crack. He approached and pushed it. In the dim light was the blue Buick. He stepped inside the garage and strained to see. Someone was in the car, in the driver's seat. A figure. Silver hair. The head pushed back.

“Gabe?”

Nothing moved. Silver hair. A dark, gaping hole. Almost frozen, Ryan peered closer. “Gabe?!”

A thick spray of blood coated the headrest and seat.

“Oh, Jesus!” Ryan fell back. Electricity surged and the explosion of thunder crackled overhead. “Gabe!”

He staggered across the yard and fell against the porch steps. He picked himself up and ran stumbling through the bushes to the front of the house. Inside the truck, he found the keys, started the engine, and charged out in reverse. The road was invisible, the wipers forgotten. He doubled over with nausea, but drove. The truck slowed in the street near BJ's. He opened the door and vomited. Against the red light, the International rolled across the highway and into the parking lot of the police station.

CHAPTER 8

The state police station at Scappoose was in an old brick building. On a tall pole, the flag rapped violently in the storm.

Inside, a lady in her fifties sat behind a counter. The smile left her face when she saw him enter. “Can I help you?” she asked.

Ryan’s voice was hoarse. “A friend. He’s dead.”

The lady gestured vaguely. “Uh, what? Come around here, what now? You say someone’s dead? Captain Booth!”

Ryan slogged around the counter in a trance. He stood next to a folding chair while puddles formed at his shoes.

“Goodness. Sit down here,” the woman commanded. “What happened?”

Ryan sat, held his head, and stared at the floor. His raspy voice was a whisper. “Gabe is dead. Gabe Riplinger.”

“Captain Booth! Come here please!”

“He’s in a car, in back. His head, shot. Oh my God.”

The woman’s jaw dropped. She yelled toward the back. “Captain Booth!”

THE MINE

Captain Booth charged through a back door, past a desk and filing cabinets to where Ryan sat. A tall man with glasses and a crew cut, he looked flustered. “What the hell’s wrong?”

“This man says someone’s been shot!”

“Where?” Booth demanded.

Ryan was still looking at the floor. His tears joined the rainwater. His voice nearly vanished. “His house. Forsythe Road.”

“Is this man alive?”

Ryan shook his head. “No.”



Ryan accompanied Captain Booth, the county sheriff, and a deputy. They taped off Gabe’s residence and posted the deputy overnight. A detective would visit the following morning and go through it all. After inspecting the external premises and garage, Booth and the officer had decided to enter the house. Ryan had waited with the deputy in his cruiser for an hour. Afterward, Booth and the sheriff had asked all the questions about Gabe’s next of kin, his wife, her death, many questions. Gabe’s sister in Minneapolis would be called. After hours of questions and snooping around the place, Captain Booth had concluded out loud that it looked like a suicide. There had been no break-in, no obvious theft. A gun had been found in Gabe’s hand.



Suicide? Driving back to DEQ, Ryan’s sight clouded over. He fought just to breath while he mouthed the word. Suicide?

He checked his watch. It was just after four. He dreaded the job that had fallen on him.

At work, Ryan went to Evelyn's cube. From there he could see Lochner's office. The door was open and the man was sitting and staring out the darkening window. Ryan put a hand on her shoulder. "Come on, Eve."

She looked up with moist eyes while clutching a white handkerchief. "Is he all right? What happened?"

Ryan gestured with his head. "Come on."

She stood quickly and followed Ryan into Lochner's office.

"Mr. Lochner, I need a minute with you," said Ryan.

Lochner turned in his chair. "Ryan, come in! Evelyn's been looking for you."

Ryan closed the door. "Eve, sit down." He turned a chair toward her.

She sat slowly.

Ryan spoke. "Evelyn asked me to drop by Gabe's home over lunch."

Lochner put down the nail file and nodded. "Yes, so what can you tell us? He decided to get sick for his last week? Evelyn's been beside herself, threatening to call in the feds."

A wrench wrapped around Ryan's throat. "I'm afraid Gabe has passed away."

Evelyn burst into sobs. Lochner's face blanched.

"He apparently died over the weekend," Ryan continued. He put his hand on Evelyn's shoulder while fighting off his own tears. "I'm sorry."

Lochner sat ashen with wide eyes. He stared at the far wall while Evelyn cried and Ryan tried to console her.

Lochner finally spoke, in a gasp. "Do they know what he died of?"

Ryan grimaced. "The police, the coroner. I'm sure they'll know soon enough."

Lochner ran a shaking hand across his scalp. His voice was faint. "But they have no idea what killed him?"

THE MINE

Ryan eyed Evelyn. The question, the wording, seemed brutal. “I don’t know. The authorities will know soon. I was thinking you could inform the group here.”

Several excruciating minutes passed as Evelyn wept and Lochner sat with his mouth ajar stared at the wall.

Lochner finally rose and put his clammy hand on Ryan’s shoulder. “I’ll announce it tonight, before everyone leaves. This group is a family. We’ll need to pull together.”



Ryan entered the house through the back door with Gabe’s dog, Shakespeare, in tow. In the kitchen, Meagan was busy at the sink. She turned and his face gave it away.

“What happened?”



Tuesday, Ryan hid at home. The night before, Meagan had taken the revelation hard. They had talked until late and spent the morning together, saying little and hugging a lot.

After she left for work, he fell into the couch with a wadded-up pillow and the television remote. There would be speculation at DEQ and he didn’t want to be the one to tell them, especially Evelyn, that sweet old Gabe had put a gun in his mouth. Maybe it would never come out. An old man had quietly passed away.

Jerry Springer filled the room. The little white dog, Sophie, sat on the floor and faced Ryan with inquisitive eyes. After twenty minutes of Jerry, commercials, and the terrier’s persistence, Ryan tossed the pillow and rolled off the couch. He ambled through the house and exited out the back door, with Sophie and Shakespeare following.

In the garage, he collected tools: an ancient electric saw of his dad’s, a tape measure, hammer, and wrenches. The upstairs

bathroom floor was rotted out. New flooring had already been bought on sale and waited in the garage.

Back inside, Ryan began removing the toilet. After disconnecting the plumbing, the porcelain water tank came off easy. The toilet bowl was heavy and he struggled to keep from gashing the bathroom door. He set the bowl and tank in the hallway, on cardboard, to protect the hardwood floor.

Next was the sink. Everything except the bathtub needed to be removed. By 11:30, the sink and the pedestal were lying in the hall and Ryan broke for lunch.

In the kitchen, he made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and poured a glass of milk. The two dogs happily shared in the meal.

Ryan had just returned to his work when the phone rang. It had to be Meagan, checking up on him. He stepped around the fixtures and in the small den, checked the caller ID on the desk. It was Karina. He didn't answer.

The next step involved the electrical saw. The whine echoed loudly in the bathroom and Sophie fled downstairs. He cut the floor perimeter, made a few crosscuts, and then set to work with a pry bar and hammer, tearing out the floor in pieces. Thoughts of Gabe invaded repeatedly. The man had offered to help put a new roof on the house. Ryan had politely refused; the thought of the old cowboy slipping off the moss-covered roof had worried him. But that was typical Gabe.

The work became tedious. Where the floor was out, Ryan sat down carefully on the open joists and pried up the last few pieces. Dark and rotted, the old wood splintered in his hands. The questions returned. There were no signs. Gabe woke up Sunday morning, after telling the world he had everything to live for, and blew his brains out? Ryan wiped the dust from his eyes.

The phone rang again. It was Meagan, to ask how he was doing. He was all right. She had grocery shopping to do and would be home by 5:30. He avoided mentioning the bathroom floor. Meagan's voice carried a melody, a rhythm that he

treasured. She could make her feelings known in the most delicate way, and against that voice, Ryan was defenseless. After a few I love yous, he said goodbye.



The next morning, Ryan found the phone number for the state police in Scappoose. The same woman answered. He had not gotten her name.

“This is Ryan Evans. Is Captain Booth in? I’m calling about Gabe Riplinger.”

“He is not. Do you have a specific question?”

“Well, Mr. Riplinger had no family nearby. Have you been able to contact his sister?”

“We have communicated with his sister, Mariam Steinhold.”

“I see.”

Ryan had met Mariam at one of Gabe’s barbecues. She had flown out from Minnesota to visit. She was jovial, like her brother.

“Will there be an autopsy?” Ryan asked.

“No.”

“Where is Gabe’s body?”

“Are you next of kin?”

“No. I just want to be sure things are taken care of.”

“That information is limited to next of kin.”

“Could you give me Mariam Steinhold’s telephone number?”

“I’m sorry, I cannot.”

Ryan sighed. The notion of privacy was ridiculous. He had spent several exhausting hours with these people less than 48 hours before. “I’m the one who discovered him. You remember.”

“Yes.”

“So, is there a funeral home?” Ryan asked.

The woman sucked an indignant breath. “The body was picked up by Goodner’s.”

It sounded to Ryan like a trash pickup. “Goodner’s?”

“Goodner’s Mortuary.”

After a search through the yellow pages and a quick call to Goodner’s Funeral Home and Mortuary, Ryan learned the details. Mariam Steinhold had arranged a memorial service at the New Hope Baptist Church in Beaverton, for 1:00 Saturday. Good thing, Ryan thought. The ancient church in Scappoose was tiny. A private burial would be Sunday at the Green Hills Cemetery, for family only. Apparently, Mariam alone would bury her brother.



Ryan returned to DEQ at noon. A check of Tommy Campbell’s cube found him reading the morning’s paper.

Ryan hesitated at the entrance and Tommy jumped in his chair. “Crap! Don’t do that!”

“Quiet in here.”

“Tell me about it. It’s been like a morgue. I mean...”

Tommy was tall and lanky, with orange stick hair and a boy’s face. Thirty years old, he looked half that.

Karina arrived with a latte in her hand and stood at Ryan’s side.

“There’s a memorial on Saturday.” said Ryan.

“It’s in this morning’s paper,” Tommy offered. “They don’t give a cause.”

Ryan nodded and spoke slowly. “The burial is on Sunday. His sister is handling it. The Sunday gathering is family only, whatever that means.”

Karina set her latte down. “You found him?”

Ryan nodded.

“Where was he?”

The inevitable questions, thought Ryan. “In the garage.”

After a long pause, she spoke softly. “Do they know, I mean, do they have any idea of what happened?”

Ryan shrugged and began looking for a way out of the conversation.

Tommy’s pencil tapped out a slow rhythm on the desk. “My sister knows a woman, she goes to Grace Community. It’s Gabe’s church in Scappoose. She said it was a suicide.”

Karina’s head shook. “What? Gossip!”

Ryan’s shoulders sagged. He instantly became livid at the person who had decided to destroy the man’s memory.

Karina caught him. “Ryan, what happened?”

Ryan’s eyes rose from the carpet and danced over the cube walls. The floor was quiet. He sat down in the spare chair next to Tommy and pulled Karina in close. “Keep this to yourself. I mean it. I found him in the car.” Ryan pulled a stuttering breath and whispered. “He had been shot in the head.”

Karina’s hand flew to her mouth. “My God!”

“He didn’t suffer. I got the police and went back with them. They think it was suicide.”

Karina’s brown eyes were saucers. “Impossible!”

Ryan grabbed her arm. “Quiet!”

Tears welled in her eyes. She spoke through her fingers. “Oh my God! I thought it was a heart attack! He was so happy, at the party! He had plans.”

A pause while they each acknowledged this fact. Tommy looked at Ryan. “You knew him better than we did. Does it make any sense to you?”

“No. It makes no sense to me.”