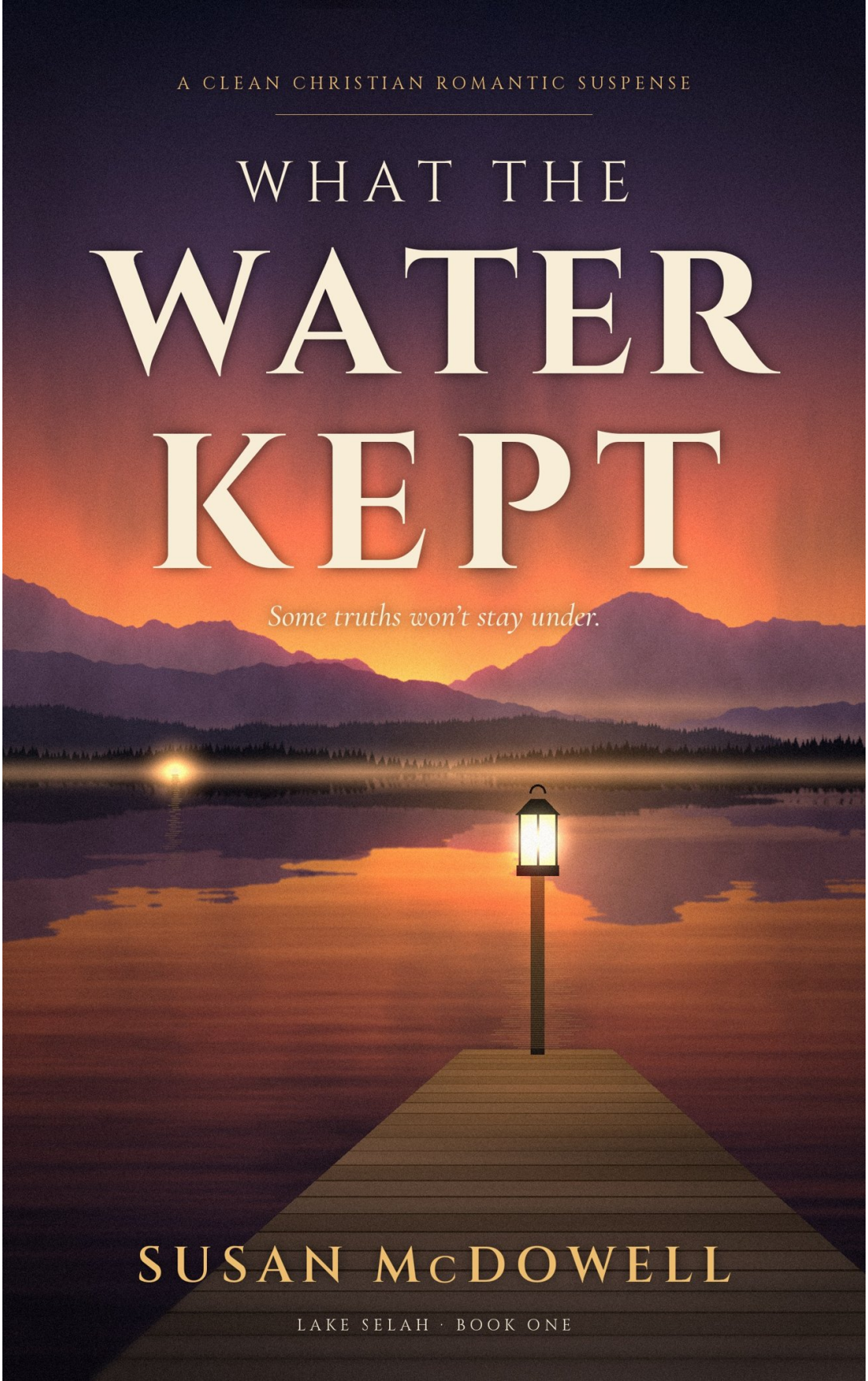

A CLEAN CHRISTIAN ROMANTIC SUSPENSE
WHAT THE
WATER
KEPT
Some truths won't stay under.
SUSAN McDOWELL
LAKE SELAH · BOOK ONE



What the Water Kept

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A CLEAN CHRISTIAN ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

Lake Selah · Book One

Susan McDowell

Thinking School

What the Water Kept

Lake Selah, Book One

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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version. The hymns quoted are in the public domain: "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" (Robert Robinson, 1758) and "It Is Well with My Soul" (Horatio Spafford, 1873).

Content note: this is a closed-door romance with no profanity. The story involves the death of a teenager in the past, a hit-and-run, domestic violence described after the fact, dementia, a fire and a near-drowning. None of it is graphic.

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For everyone who kept a promise
nobody thanked them for.

The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

PSALM 46:7

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PART ONE

Low Water

October

One

JOSIE

Monday, October 19

THE LAKE WAS gone.

Josie Abernathy had read about the drawdown. She had seen the notice from the Valley Authority, the one that used the phrase *extraordinary maintenance* and promised that Lake Selah would return to summer pool by the first of June. She had even looked at the photographs in the Tolliver Ledger online, on her lunch break, with a sandwich in one hand. None of it had prepared her for coming around the last bend of Heron Cove Road and finding a quarter mile of cracked brown mud where the water ought to be.

She stopped the car in the middle of the road. Nobody honked. Nobody had been behind her since the county line.

Her father's dock stood on dry land. It had always floated, a gray rectangle of treated pine riding on blue barrels at the end of a hinged ramp, and now the barrels sat in the mud like something a flood had left behind, and the ramp slanted down to them at an angle that made the whole thing look ashamed of itself. Beyond the dock the cove sloped away, past the line where she and her mother used to stand to their waists, past the drop-off her father had forbidden her to swim beyond, all the way down to a channel of pewter-colored water so far off and so narrow that it looked like a river.

It was a river, she supposed. It was the one they had drowned in 1954 to make the lake.

At the end of the dock stood the lantern post. She could see it from here, a silver stick against the mud.

Low on that post, on the side that faced the water, there were two sets of initials and a date. *6-17-11.* She had been seventeen. A boy had cut them with a pocketknife. On that same night, three miles down the shore, his sister had gone missing, and by the end of the summer the town had settled on who was to blame. It was Josie's father.

She was not going to walk down there and look at it. Not today.

"Well," she said to the windshield. "That's subtle."

She pulled into the gravel drive. The house looked the way it had in June, when she had come to move her father out of it: a brown cedar box with a green tin roof and a screened porch that leaned an inch toward the water. Somebody had mowed. Somebody had also left a foil-covered dish on the porch step, weighted with a rock, and she knew without lifting the foil that it was chicken spaghetti, and that the somebody was Verna Cates.

The key stuck. It always had. You had to lift the knob and lean, and she lifted and leaned, and the door gave, and the house breathed its particular breath at her. Cedar. Old coffee. A trace of lake that got into the walls and never left, even now, with the lake itself a quarter mile off.

And paper. Her father's house had always smelled of paper. Thirty-one years in a pulpit made a great deal of it, and he had never thrown a sheet away.

She stood in the front room with her bag still on her shoulder and took inventory the way she did at work when a collection came in off a truck. A room was easier to look at that way. Condition report, front room, Abernathy residence. Bookshelves, four, overfull, some bowing. One recliner, plaid, a hollow worn into the seat. One upright piano her mother had played, lid closed, a ring on the wood where somebody had set down a glass. Boxes, a great many, stacked along the wall under the window in the order she had left them in June with a strip of blue painter's tape on each one. KEEP. GIVE. ASK DAD.

Eleven boxes said ASK DAD. Four months ago that had seemed like a reasonable category.

She set her bag down and went through to the kitchen and filled a glass at the tap and drank it standing at the sink, looking out the window at the mud.

Six weeks. That was what the library had given her, six weeks of family leave, and she had made a list on the drive from Nashville so that the six weeks would have a shape. Meet with the people at Maple Row about her father's

care plan. Meet with a realtor. Finish the boxes. Sell the house before Christmas, if a house on a lake with no lake in it could be sold. Go home.

She liked the list. It had nothing on it that required her to feel anything in particular, and she had checked it twice for that.



THE SCRATCHING STARTED at the back door before she had finished the water.

She knew the sound. She opened the door, and forty pounds of elderly beagle and something lower-slung came through it like a furniture delivery, shoulder first, and collapsed across her feet.

"Obadiah," she said. "You're supposed to be next door."

The dog rolled an eye up at her. He had gone white around the muzzle since June. Her father had named every dog he ever owned after a minor prophet, on the theory that nobody else was using them. There had been Amos and Nahum before she was born, and Habakkuk, who had bitten a deacon, and Zephaniah, who had lived to be seventeen, and now Obadiah, who had the shortest book in the Old Testament and the longest ears in Tolliver County.

"He heard your car," said a voice from the yard. "I couldn't have held him with a winch."

Verna Cates came up the back steps one at a time with a hand on the rail. She was eighty-one, and built like a wren, and she wore a quilted vest the color of a traffic cone that Josie was fairly sure she had owned since the Carter administration. She had played the piano at Selah Community Church for fifty-three years. She had also, for the last four months, driven to Maple Row every Tuesday and Friday to sit with a man who did not always know her name, and she had never once mentioned it to Josie as though it were a favor.

"Miss Verna."

"Don't *Miss Verna* me, come here."

It was like being hugged by a bundle of kindling. Josie held on a second longer than she meant to.

"You're thin," Verna said, stepping back to look. "They don't feed you in Nashville. Did you find the spaghetti?"

"I found it. Thank you."

"It's the kind with the Ro-Tel. Your daddy likes it. I took him some Friday and he ate two helpings and told me I ought to marry the cook." She said it cheerfully, and then her face did something small, a flicker, and settled. "He's having a good stretch, Josie. I want you to know that before you go over there. Some days he's as much himself as he ever was."

"And the other days?"

"The other days he's still kind." Verna reached down and pulled one of Obie's ears through her fingers. "I've known men with every marble they were issued who couldn't manage that."

Josie didn't have an answer, so she looked at the lake instead. From the back steps you could see the whole cove, and past the mouth of it the main channel, and across the channel the long gray slope of the far shore where the water had pulled away from the trees and left a band of pale rock like a bathtub ring.

"How low is it going to go?"

"That's it. That's the bottom of it, they say. Thirty-four feet under winter pool. Lowest since they closed the gates the first time." Verna shaded her eyes. "You can walk out to Old Selah now. All the way. You can stand on the church steps. Half the county's been out there with their phones."

"Have you?"

"I'm eighty-one years old, I'm not walking a mile of mud to look at steps." A pause. "Jonah Mercer drove me out on a four-wheeler. It was the best afternoon I've had since Easter."

Josie laughed. It came out rusty, and it surprised her. She hadn't expected to laugh here, not on the first day.

"Who's Jonah Mercer?"

"The pastor. Four years now. You'd know that if you ever—" Verna stopped herself, which was rare, and patted Josie's arm instead. "Never mind. He's a good one. He's young. He doesn't know where anything is."

You'd know that if you ever came. It was only what was true. Josie had not been inside Selah Community Church since she was twenty-three years old and they had carried her mother out of it, down the center aisle past pews of people who had not brought so much as a pound cake to the house in the six years it took Ellen Abernathy to die. She had stood on the front steps after-

ward in a black dress and thought, quite clearly, *I am done,* and it had been one of the calmer thoughts of her life.

She had not been angry. People got that wrong, the few she'd ever told. Anger was something you could mend. This had been more like a ledger closing.

"I'll go see him in the morning," she said. "I thought I'd let him have his supper in peace."

"That's sensible." Verna started down the steps and then turned back, one hand on the rail. "The light's out, by the way. On the dock. It quit in August and I didn't have anybody to send. I know he'd want it on."

Josie looked. At the end of the stranded dock stood the post her grandfather had set in 1961, and on top of it the brass lantern her father had wired for electricity the summer she was nine. He had left that lantern burning every night of her childhood. *So anybody out on the water can find their way in,* he used to say, and when she was small she had believed there were boats out there depending on it.

It was dark now. One pane was cracked.

"There's no water for anybody to be out on," she said.

"No," Verna agreed. "But he'd want it on."

SHE ATE THE chicken spaghetti cold, standing up, which her mother would have had words about. Then she carried her bag to the back bedroom, the one with the slanted ceiling that had been hers on weekends and in summers, back when the Abernathys lived in the parsonage in town and the cabin was only the place they went to breathe.

Somebody had put clean sheets on the bed. Verna again.

Josie sat on the edge of the mattress with Obie's chin on her shoe and let herself be tired. The drive was only three and a half hours. The arriving was what wore a person out.

Through the window the light was going orange. October in East Tennessee did that, saved its whole budget of color for the last hour of the day and then spent it at once, and the ridges across the lake had gone the red-brown of

a book cloth she used at work, the one the supplier called Garnet and everybody in the lab called Dried Blood. The mud flats were turning pink.

She ought to unpack. She ought to start a box.

Instead she got up and went out the back door and down the yard, past the rhododendrons her mother had planted and the fire ring nobody had used since 2011, and out onto the ramp. It bounced under her the way it always had, though now it bounced her downhill. The dock at the bottom was solid and strange underfoot. No give. No slap of water on the barrels.

She walked to the end of it and put her hand on the lantern post.

The wood was silver and furred with age. Down low, on the side that faced the water, somebody had cut two sets of initials into it, one above the other, with the small blade of a pocketknife, and she didn't have to look to know they were there. She looked anyway.

J.A.

C.R.

No heart. No plus sign. He had been too careful for that even at eighteen. Just the letters, and under them a date she could have recited in her sleep: *6-17-11.*

Fifteen years, four months, and two days. She had not meant to do the arithmetic. It was simply there, like a call number.

On the night of June 17, 2011, Josie Abernathy had been seventeen years old and had sat on this dock until half past ten with a boy who had just kissed her for the first time. Three miles down the shore, his sister had walked out of the bait shop at Pruitt's Marina and off the face of the earth.

Marnie Rawlins. Sixteen. An alto. She had been able to do a cartwheel in a choir robe.

By September her father had lost his pulpit. Nobody ever charged him with anything.

And the boy had never said a word. Not to her, not for her father.

She took her hand off the wood.

That was when she noticed the lights.

They were a long way off, down the main channel toward the south end where the old ferry road ran into what was left of the water. Blue ones, and a white one sweeping. She counted two boats on the channel and what looked

like three or four vehicles on the bank above it, small as toys, and a larger shape that might have been a truck with a winch.

A drowning, was her first thought. Some fool had walked out on the flats to look at Old Selah and found the soft place. The Ledger had warned about that.

But nobody was hurrying. She watched for a full minute, and the lights stayed where they were and the boats sat still on the water. It had the look of a job that was going to take all night.

Obie had followed her down. He sat on the dock boards beside her and leaned his whole weight against her shin and sighed.

"I know," she said. "I don't like it either."

Her phone buzzed in her back pocket. Bree Whitaker, who had been her best friend since the second grade and who owned the bakery on Main Street and who knew everything that happened in Selah Springs roughly four minutes before it happened.

Are you at the house yet

Just got in, Josie typed. *What's going on down at the ferry road?*

The three dots appeared and disappeared and appeared again. Bree, who had never in her life hesitated over a text, was hesitating.

Jos. Sit down ok

I'm on a dock. Just tell me.

The next message took a long time to come. When it did, Josie read it twice, and then she sat down after all, right there on the gray boards with her back against the post.

The survey crew found a car in the old channel this afternoon. Roof's sticking out of the mud. Honey, it's green.

Two

CALEB

Tuesday, October 20

AT TEN PAST six in the morning the light was the color of dishwater, and Caleb Rawlins stood in a foot of river with his sister's license plate in his hands.

He had not needed to scrub it. Fifteen years of silt had come off under his glove in one wipe, and there it was, white letters on the old green-hills design the state hadn't issued since he was in college. He knew the number. He had put that plate on himself, in the driveway on Dogwood Lane, with a screwdriver from his father's red toolbox, while Marnie sat on the hood and told him he was doing it crooked.

It had been crooked. It was still crooked.

"Sarge."

He didn't turn around.

"Caleb." Owen Tate waded up beside him and stood there. Owen was six foot three and had a voice like a slow truck, and he had the sense to let a quiet go on. They had been partners on the marine unit for seven years. "Wrecker's ready when you are. And Agent Ruiz is up top asking who's in charge of this recovery, and when I said you, she got a look."

"What kind of look?"

"Kind my grandmama gets when the preacher runs long."

Caleb set the plate down on the hood of the car. He did it carefully, the way he would have set down something that could still break.

The Civic sat nose-down in the bed of the old river channel, tilted a little toward the driver's side, buried to the door handles in gray-brown silt. The Authority's survey crew had spotted the roof at four the afternoon before, when the pool dropped the last eighteen inches. By five there had been a deputy on the bank. By six somebody had called Caleb at home, and it was not the sheriff who called but Owen, who had said only, "You need to come down to the ferry ramp, and you need to let me drive."

He had not let Owen drive.

They had worked all night under the light towers. You couldn't just hook a chain to a thing like that and pull. Fifteen years on the bottom turned sheet metal to lace, and whatever was inside the car had to come up inside it. So they had dug. Six men from the dive team in waders with flat shovels, trenching the silt away from the frame a bucket at a time, sliding the lift straps under by feel. Caleb had run the dig. Nobody had suggested he shouldn't. He figured that was because nobody had wanted to be the one to say it.

He had not looked through the windows. The glass was down on both front doors, he could tell that much from the frames, and the cabin was packed solid with mud to the roofline. He'd have seen nothing.

He had not looked anyway.

"Tell the wrecker five minutes," he said. "I want the straps checked again on the downstream side."

"I checked them."

"Then I'll check them."

Owen let out a breath through his nose. "All right."

Caleb went around the back of the car. The water in the channel was November-cold already, though it was only October, and it ran slow and thick around his shins. Above him, on both sides, the lake bed climbed away in terraces of cracked mud. Fifty feet up the left bank was the old ferry ramp, a tongue of broken concrete that came down out of the trees and simply quit, pointing at the place where he stood. In a normal year its end lay under forty feet of water.

You could see how it had gone. A car in neutral at the top of that ramp would roll straight and fast and go off the end like a sled. It would float for a bit, nose-heavy, drifting out. Then it would settle, right here, into the deepest hole in the south end of the lake.

Nobody drove onto the old ferry ramp by accident. There was a steel cable across the top of it and a sign.

He crouched and ran his hand along the downstream strap, and it was seated fine. Of course it was. Owen had checked it.

He stayed down there a moment longer anyway, where nobody could see his face.

I've been asking You for this for fifteen years. He didn't shape it into a prayer. It just went through him, flat. *I guess I should have said what I meant by it.*

SPECIAL AGENT MARISOL Ruiz of the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation was waiting at the top of the ramp with a paper cup of coffee and a windbreaker zipped to the chin. She was perhaps thirty-five, small, with black hair pulled back hard and the kind of stillness Caleb associated with people who had sat through a lot of depositions.

"Sergeant Rawlins."

"Ma'am."

"I've been here twenty minutes," she said. "In that twenty minutes three different people have told me the victim's name without my asking. Two of them told me who did it." She took a sip of coffee. "Nobody told me that the officer running the recovery has the same last name as the girl. I had to read that off your shirt."

There wasn't much to say to that. He waited.

"District Attorney General asked the Bureau to take this at seven last night. As of now it's mine. I'm grateful for the dig. That's careful work down there and I'll say so in writing." Her eyes were dark and not unkind. "But you're done, Sergeant. You know you are. When that car comes up the bank, I need you standing on the other side of the tape."

"I know it."

"Do you?"

"I knew it at six o'clock last night." He looked past her, at the wrecker idling with its boom out over the drop. "I couldn't make myself leave her down there with strangers. I'm not going to apologize for that. I'll write you a statement on everything I touched."

Ruiz studied him. Then she nodded, once, as if he'd given the right answer to a question she hadn't asked.

"Is there family that needs telling?"

"My mother. I'll do it. I'd like to do it before she hears it at the Food City."

"Go now, then. I'm told that's about a forty-minute window in this town."

"More like fifteen."

He should have gone. He meant to. But the wrecker's engine changed pitch right then, and the cable came taut, and he turned around because not turning around was beyond him.

The Civic came out of the mud with a long wet sound. It rose a foot, and hung, streaming, and the boom swung it slowly in toward the bank. Somebody had stretched a blue tarp across the front windows from outside so that nothing would spill. Under the gray coat of silt, where the straps had rubbed, the paint showed through, and it was green.

She had called it Kermit. She had saved for eleven months, working the fuel dock at the marina. She'd had the car for seven weeks.

"Sergeant," Ruiz said quietly.

"I'm going."

He walked up through the trees to where the vehicles were parked. He got as far as the tailgate of his county Tahoe before his legs stopped taking instruction, and he put both hands flat on the cold metal and stood there with his head down, breathing.

Not crying. He had cried once, at nineteen, in a dormitory stairwell in Knoxville, and it had done so little good he had never bothered with it again.

Somebody put a hand on the back of his neck. It was a big hand, rough as a rasp, and it gripped him the way you'd grip a boy.

"I've got you, son."

Roy Kessler had been sheriff of Tolliver County for twenty years and retired for eight. He was sixty-eight, and he still stood like a man with a duty belt on, and he must have driven down in the dark as soon as the scanner told him, because he was wearing his barn coat over a pajama shirt. He had been Hank Rawlins's best friend. He was Caleb's godfather. He had run the search for Marnie in 2011 and kept running it, in one form or another, until the day he turned in his badge.