

THE SAINTS  
of  
WHISTLE GROVE

Also by Katie Schuermann

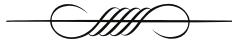
FICTION

- + *House of Living Stones*
- + *The Choir Immortal*
- + *The Harvest Raise*

NONFICTION

- + *He Remembers the Barren*
- + *He Restores My Soul*
- + *Pew Sisters*

KATIE SCHUERMANN



THE Saints OF  
Whistle Grove

A NOVEL

KLORIA PUBLISHING + CASPER, WYOMING

‡ *Soli Deo Gloria* ‡

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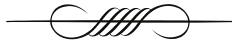
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*For all the saints,  
those coming out of the great tribulation  
and those still walking through it*



All thy works shall praise thee, O LORD;  
and thy saints shall bless thee.  
They shall speak of the glory of thy kingdom,  
and talk of thy power;  
To make known to the sons of men his mighty acts,  
and the glorious majesty of his kingdom.  
Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
and thy dominion endureth throughout all generations.

— Psalm 145:10–13, KJV



# Editor's Note

IT IS COMMONLY ACCEPTED that the geographic places where people live have a direct and profound influence on them. Their art, culture, cuisine, and even language are shaped by the land that surrounds them. But what is not always so quickly recognized is the effect that people have on places. I am not speaking so much about the obvious effects of humans on land, as seen in the form of industry, housing developments, cultivation, and the like. I am speaking of the subtler, less tangible ways that we mortals influence the places we inhabit. A house that is lived in, where love grows and thrives, will be different than an abandoned house that has not known laughter for years. Yes, there will be tangible differences between these two, but there will also be differences that we can never quite put to words.

This should not be a complete surprise to those of us who believe that the Lord has created mankind in His own image. When He gave the mandate and blessing to Adam and Eve to fill the earth and subdue it, He certainly meant that we are to take the raw elements of creation and bring them to their proper ends through industry, culture, and art. But just as our Lord changes things by His presence alone, it should not be so strange for us to think that we who are made in His image also affect things by our own presence, even if in subtle ways that cannot be measured or weighed. Our joy is completed when others are there to share it. Our sufferings are transformed when a friend sits with us, even when it is in silence.

What you hold in your hands is an exploration of this reciprocal influence that people and places have on each other as interconnected

pieces of God's creation. The joys, sorrows, divisions, reconciliations, lives, and deaths of the people living in this corner of creation will have a profound effect on the grove that God has entrusted to them. This grove, for its part, will echo and rhyme these experiences from one generation to the next.

The story of this place and its people is not told chronologically. For those of us used to linear storytelling, that can be a different reading experience. But what Katie Schuermann is doing is setting you free to explore the grove to see the ways that all these creations of God influence each other in life, death, loss, and love. She is inviting you to hear the ringing of bells and see the blooming of perennials not only in one season, but echoing and blossoming across the story of God's people in this place. Mrs. Schuermann is a very good guide, so keep your eyes open and don't be afraid to go back and walk through that barn again or sit under that tree for another hour.

It has often been noted that we are on the cusp of seismic change in our own cultural time and place. Congregations are beginning to look different throughout our nation. Communities are drastically changed from what they were a few short decades ago. Some congregations may need to close their doors. Some beloved towns and villages, even cities, may feel a creeping fear of decay. That is why stories like this one are important. We are reminded that a church — that *the* Church — is more than a present moment. The people of God have had their influence on the places we live, no matter how they appear in a single moment, according to the measure God has given them. And that will resonate and weave itself into our own loves and losses, lives and deaths. It will even be part of our own resurrection and the life of the world to come.

Rev. Tony Oliphant

Redeemer Lutheran Church, Elmhurst, Illinois

Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, A.D. 2023

# Foreword

ALL OVER AMERICA CONGREGATIONS ARE DYING. Methodist, Baptist, Catholic — all kinds. Usually this is because of demographic reasons: young people move out and old people just move on. For each of these congregations, there's a story. Real people prayed and worshipped there; they were baptized and married there; and often as not they shared meals, played, and gossiped there — sometimes they argued and fought. And yes, they also died and were buried there.

The cemetery, like the sanctuary, is an essential part of the church, especially in country churches. This is where the story ends for its members. They get there by different routes, but they do arrive all the same. It's somewhat ironic then that when a church finally closes its doors, it's more likely to live on through its cemetery than any other way. Arrangements are made to take care of the dead, often legally imposed, even if buildings are repurposed or torn down. Thus the story of a dying church not only includes the cemetery, but concludes — or even continues — there as well.

Sometimes, historians try to tell these stories. They do so on the basis of evidence — documents, artifacts, and perhaps interviews with old members. Imagination plays only a limited role. Historians may make an educated guess now and again, but that's about it.

But people are more than documents, artifacts, and interviews. And people are the most important part of a church. If we really want the story of a church, we need storytellers, not historians, to give us the people. That's where Katie Schuermann comes in. She

is a first-class storyteller, and in this book she gives us the story of a church in Whistle Grove, Illinois with its doors now closed (except to the occasional vagrant) after 150 years. Both the church and the community are products of Mrs. Schuermann's imagination, but the people we meet are very real, just like those we find in churches today. Their names might be a little different (originally, they were all Germans), they come from various time periods, and, with a couple of notable exceptions, all of them now reside in the church graveyard. But their fears and their failings, their hopes and their dreams, their loves and their hates will all sound familiar to anyone who reads this book. They are all very human.

Central to the story Mrs. Schuermann tells is the relationship of her characters to their church, their fellow members, and their pastor. From time to time, church doctrine and practice come up. But this is not a sermon disguised as a novel. It's about people who hold the name Christian and what their faith means to them in their living and dying.

Thornton Wilder's wonderful play, *Our Town*, concludes in a cemetery and with the audience in tears. A good novel about a cemetery can do something similar; and Mrs. Schuermann's certainly does. So keep the Kleenex handy. But her approach is different than Wilder's. For him, the cemetery is the end of the play and the end of life. That's where everyone goes and stays put. Mrs. Schuermann, however, calls the residents of her country graveyard "saints." That does not mean they are always "saintly." Far from it. Some are better than others, but none is perfect. Their imperfections are part of what makes the story realistic — and interesting. But the title she gives them is itself an affirmation of their own expectation that their final resting place in the cemetery is not, after all, final. They *are* saints

through faith in Christ Jesus. While their church may be dead, in Him their story never really comes to an end.

Rev. Dr. Cameron A. MacKenzie

The Forrest E. and Frances H. Ellis Professor of Historical Theology  
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne

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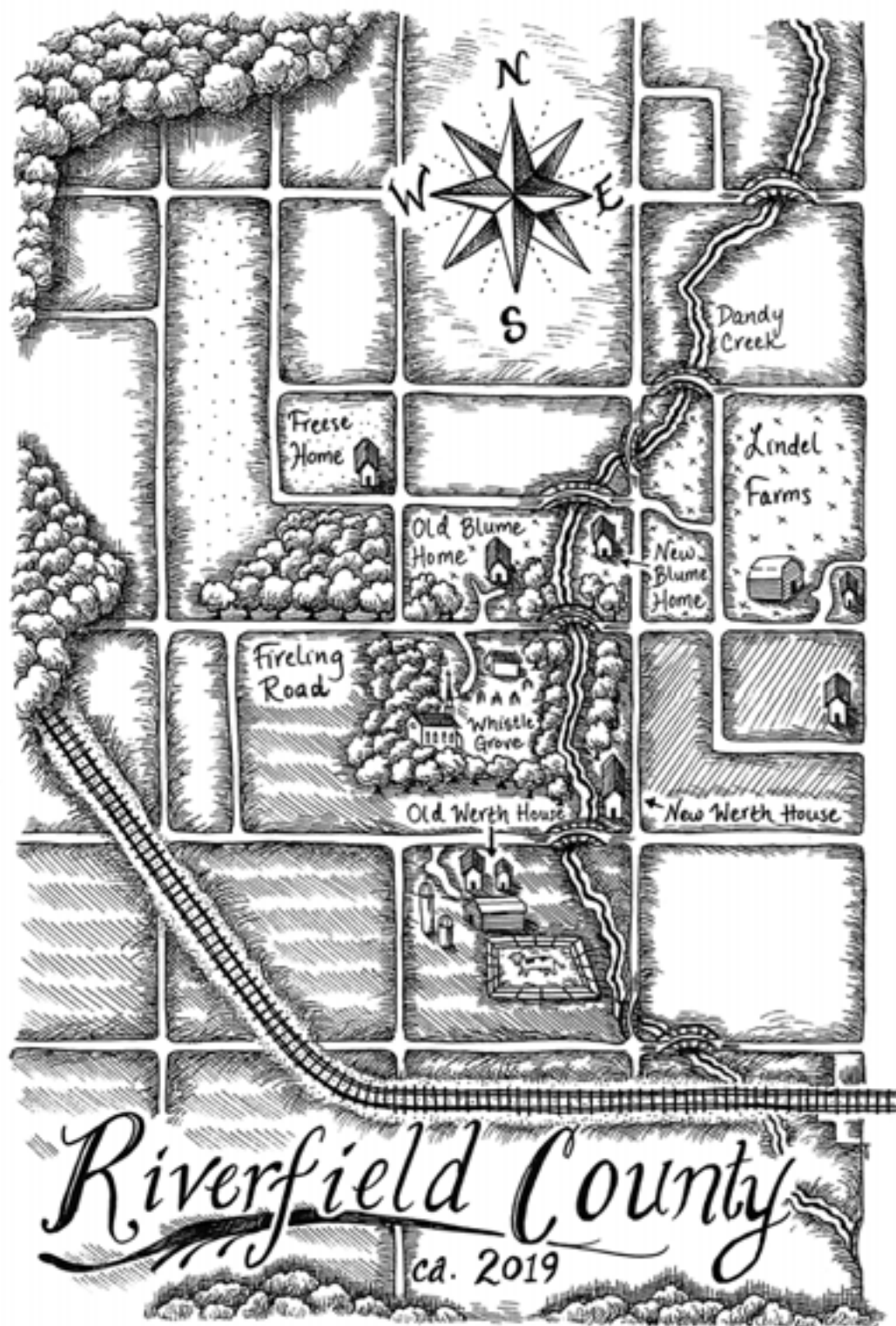
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Riverfield County

ca. 2019

City of ↑  
Riverfield

Key

-  Werth Land
-  Freese Land
-  Lindel Land
-  Reinking Land
-  Road
-  Railway
-  Wooded
-  Creek
-  Pasture

Fireling Road

Bramble

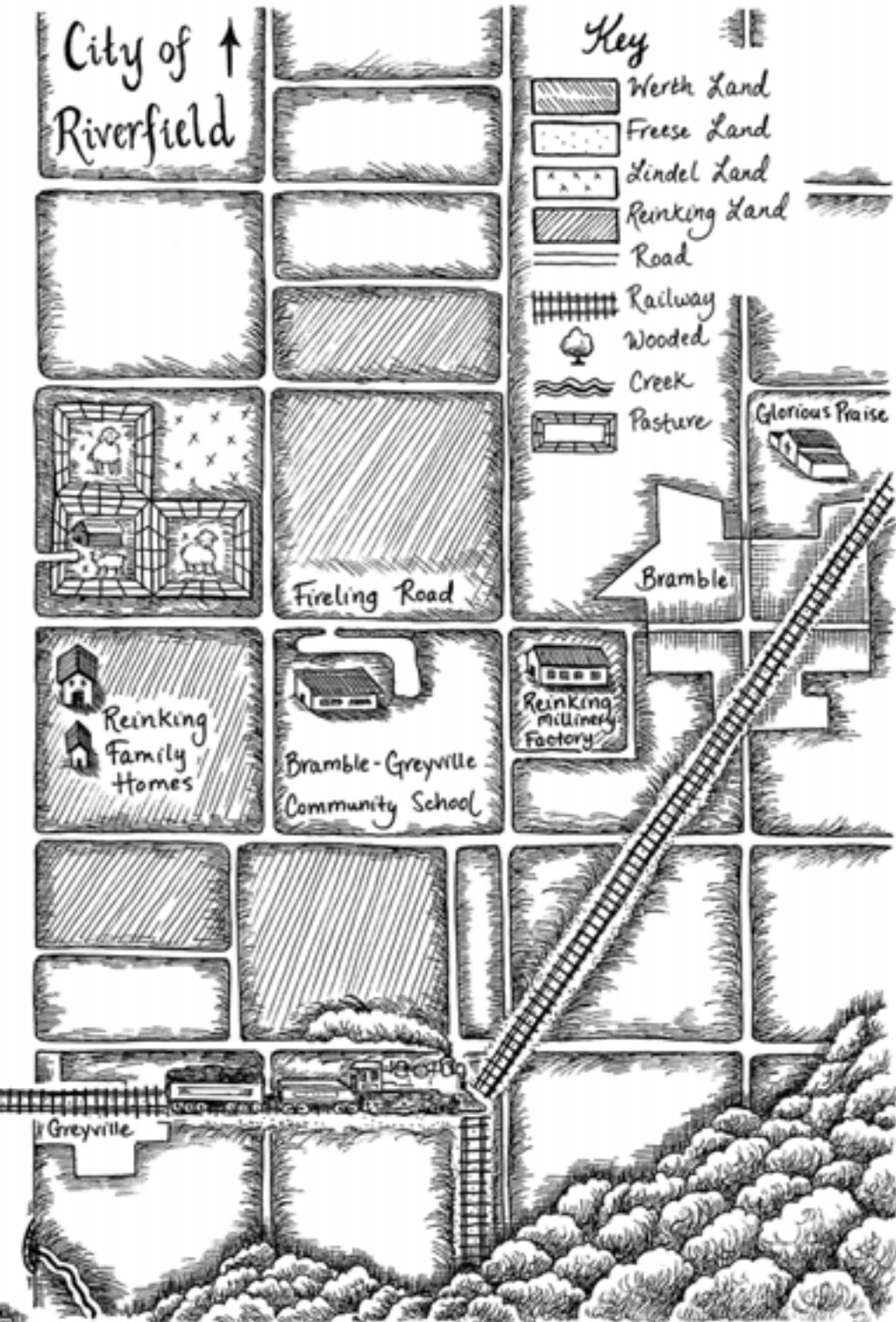
Glorious Praise

Reinking  
Family  
Homes

Bramble-Greyville  
Community School

Reinking  
Millinery  
Factory

Greyville





# The Grove



## CHAPTER ONE



# Saint Miriam

✠ 2018 ✠

FIVE MILES WEST OF TOWN, just beyond Lindel Farms and across the Dandy Creek bridge, crowds a motley grove of pawpaws, cottonwoods, silver maples, and sycamores. Their naked, intertwining branches comb the knots out of an unruly November wind, and the resulting flirty whistle tempts a line of stately pines, properly dressed against such indecencies, to turn and take a peek from across the grove. Concealed beneath the cavorting canopy is a quiet dirt lane whose quick end meets the crumbling front stoop of a white clapboard church. Few tires test their quality against the lane's petrified potholes anymore, but a solemn bell is tolling from the church's steeple, calling a procession of Buicks, Oldsmobiles, and four-wheel drives from all across the county to this frayed back pocket of the earth.

The line of cars is fifteen fenders deep, five more than the short lane can support, so the shiny black sedan transporting the officiating Rev. Edmund G. Oglethorpe makes a rogue right turn at the stoop,

bouncing over frosted turf, half-buried paving stones, and ancient tree roots to forge a new trail around the backside of the church property. Thirteen cars obediently follow the good reverend's lead except for one silver rental currently waylaid in a Thrifty Fuel parking lot. Sally Grisbone, who lost both the funeral procession and her cellular reception back at the Greyville Switch, is hotter than a steam engine.

“Whistle Grove Cemetery?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Where is it?”

“Nearby, ma'am. Not five miles from here.”

Dull pencils get to the point faster than this attendant.

“Where *exactly* is it?” Sally hovers a black Jimmy Choo above the gas pedal and stares with unblinking contempt as the languid man lights a match — dangerously close to the tinder of her temper — and pulls a long drag from his cigarette.

“Well, ma'am.” He exhales a puff of smoke. “You'll want to turn right outta this here parking lot. Then,” another drag, “at the edge of town,” another puff, “when you see a green house with white shutters — not the blue house with red shutters, mind you —” she feels her leg hair growing longer with every word, “point your engine west for near five miles till you cross a crick and come to a Jersey tied to a clothesline. That's when you'll —”

“See a sign?”

“No, ma'am. You'll see a cow.”

Sally, cursing trains, mobile service plans, and men with the name “Larry” sewn to service station shirts, turns left at the green house with the white shutters and begins looking for a wretched cow. She passes much that she doesn't see — field after field of solid dirt, farmhouses surrounded by neighborhoods of outbuildings, a

flock of sheep shearing a pasture to its scalp, Mr. Lindel's arthritic barn twisting around a 150-year-old central post — before crossing the aforementioned creek. And there, on the far-right side of the one-lane bridge, at the end of a wintered garden is — “You’ve got to be kidding me.” — Larry’s proverbial cow tethered to a sagging clothesline. To the left of the road, a dirt lane angles off through some trees, and the line of cars parked bumper-to-bumper is as good as any sign. She brakes hard, swings the silver rental into the ditch, throws the gear into park, tightens the sash on her black wool overcoat, and violates the ground repeatedly with her three-inch heels.

Fifty steps and she emerges from the wooded lane onto a gently sloping clearing. An old church sits atop the underwhelming summit, and while she is an atheist, she is not an imbecile. She nods a polite, respectful greeting to the steepled monument to human futility before turning her full attention to the business at hand. Here, finally, is Whistle Grove Cemetery, and there — under a blue tent pitched over an open hole in the ground on the far corner of the lot — is Aunt Miriam.

Sally picks her way through a sea of gravestones, some more grave than others, and approaches a cluster of bowed heads. Every person appears to be praying, so she takes advantage of the moment to sweep her eyes around the scene in swift assessment. Five hundred graves, perhaps? A thousand? She wrinkles her nose. Junkyards and dumps are not enough, apparently. People must also litter the land with themselves.

Of course, her maternal grandparents and great-grands are buried here, and soon, Aunt Miriam. But her mother, who was raised near Whistle Grove, refused to be buried here. “I’d rather die!” she had said, which was pretty funny at the time, but in the not-so-funny

end, Mother was cremated. Her ashes, under very specific orders given from a hospital bed two days before entering hospice care, were thrown into the waves crashing against her beloved Rockland Breakwater. Mother was sensible that way. Aunt Miriam was the sentimental one.

“Bless this grave . . .”

Oh, yes. Sally sighs into a pose of projected reverence and commits to affecting the local culture.

“ . . . that the body of our sister may sleep here in peace until You awaken her to glory, when she will see You face to face and know the splendor of the eternal God . . .”

Splendor. Now there is a word sorely neglected in modern conversation. These old liturgies, however bunk, do have a certain romance to them, and their rhythms feel familiar, as though they have forever been marking man’s march through time. That’s what makes fairytales appealing, she supposes. They sound older than they really are. She must find the time to read through the Christian funeral rite when she gets back home — Mother left a hymnal somewhere, didn’t she? — if only to give literary context to Western civilization. And Aunt Miriam.

“Amen.” The small congregation lifts its head as one.

“We now commit the body of our sister Miriam to the ground.” The vested reverend pours dirt onto the casket in the sign of a cross. “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him to subdue all things to Himself.”

More prayers, a hymn, a few corporate amens, and a blessing. The congregation disperses in silence, and three women step forward

to remove roses from the spray atop the casket. The last woman, silver-haired, walks a stem over to Sally.

“For you.”

“For what?” She is not in the habit of stealing flowers from the dead.

“To keep. In memory of your aunt.”

“Oh. Yes. Thank you.” Sally takes the rose and sniffs sharply, a strange and sudden sting burning her eyes. She waits for the uncomfortable sensation, as well as the stranger, to pass before acknowledging the old reverend now standing before her. He is shorter than her, and his black stole reaches almost to his shoes.

“How does that woman know who I am?”

The reverend’s smile draws aside his wrinkled cheeks like curtains. “Lila Daniels rents the old farmhouse on your family’s land. You are Marta’s daughter from Maine, yes?” Then, by way of explanation, “You have the Werth nose.”

“Sally Grisbone.” She reaches out a gloved hand, and he shakes it.

“Miriam talked of you and your many talents quite often, Ms. Grisbone.”

One of her talents is commandeering conversations. “Father, I’d like to see Aunt Miriam lowered into the ground, if I may?”

“Yes, yes. Of course. Verl?” He motions to a pair of rubber boots peeking out from behind the back flap of the tent. “Call Clark over, would you, please? It’s time to put Miriam to rest.”

Verl beckons to a man sitting in a tool truck parked against the trees, and Clark, presumably, pulls on a pair of worn leather gloves as he lumbers heavily over the dormant lawn to the tent. With capable hands, he removes two shafts suspending the casket over the grave and then, engaging some kind of hydraulic mechanism, lowers the

able-supported casket into the vault. Sally stands at the hole's edge, surprised at just how deep six feet look from the top down.

"A shovel did all of this?"

"No, ma'am," Verl answers, pointing to a rather grand storage shed near the dirt lane. "A mini excavator."

"Verl is our groundsman," the reverend confirms. Sally knows this is just a nice way of saying gravedigger.

They all watch as Clark, silent and steady, removes the cables, hand-cranked the vault lid over Aunt Miriam, and loads the unemployed rig into the bed of his truck. Man and machine are gone within minutes, and Verl, just as quickly, excuses himself to retrieve the excavator. Sally is left to ponder the dead with only the old reverend and a rather robust tufted titmouse whistling from a nearby cottonwood.

So many graves. Like pockmarks on the face of the earth.

"Was Aunt Miriam embalmed?"

"I believe so."

Gruesome business. She wrinkles her Werth nose and pushes her cause — another one of her many talents. "Embalming has Egyptian roots, yes?"

"That is my understanding."

"And Aunt Miriam was okay with this?"

"I don't remember her mentioning any aversion to the Egyptians."

She ignores the man's twitching lips and focuses on the matter at foot. "It just seems a bit duplicitous."

"Embalming the dead?"

"Christians adopting pagan practices into their sacred rituals."

“Ah,” his smile is audible in the monosyllable. “Well, most funeral homes leave that bit of history out of their brochures these days.”

“But why have their bodies pumped full of chemicals and preservatives if they believe this Jesus is going to — how did you say it? — change their ‘lowly bodies’ to be like His?”

“Why, indeed?” The reverend remains unruffled, but the titmouse blusters and shrills from his high perch. “I suppose it has something to do with the inconvenient smell of the dead.”

She feels oddly checked by the little man’s easy candor.

“You are concerned that Miriam is turning her carbon footprint into a tattoo, I think,” he allows. “But perhaps your aunt found the idea of having her remains burned up in flames like some Hindu or heathen tribe a bit too dissenting for her Christian conscience.”

He is referring to her mother’s cremation, certainly, but it is a stretch to call Mother a Christian by any standard, even one held by a reverend in the know.

“You said ‘ashes to ashes’ over Aunt Miriam earlier. Why does it matter how the dead finally get to such a state?”

“Ha! You make a point, Ms. Grisbone.”

A familiar refrain.

“But what if,” he continues, almost as if he enjoys the feel of making a point himself, “people are missing out on something important in their mad dash to cross every finish line? What if, in all of our enterprising, we’re losing the true bounty in failing to be patient? We have lost the art of waiting in this world, I think. Even in death.”

A sudden gust of wind tears through the nearby cottonwood, unsettling both the titmouse and her hair. She grabs at the collar of her coat, drawing it closer around her neck. She is free to leave,

she knows, but something about her business here feels unfinished. Cold and disgruntled, she gestures a glove toward the church. “Why are we out here instead of in there? Surely, Aunt Miriam wanted a proper funeral in the church.”

“The church is closed.”

“It can’t be opened?”

“The congregation disbanded two years ago. A board actively maintains the cemetery, but the church is closed.”

She has never heard of such a thing. “I don’t understand.”

“The economy is depressed in this area. Most everyone has moved out by now, and of those who choose to stay—well,” he gestures to the closed vault, “they are a dying breed. And the few who are well enough to have a say in the matter choose to devote the church’s remaining funds to the ongoing care of this cemetery.”

“They think the dead are more important than the living?”

“They believe the dead are alive in Christ, and so they care for them still.”

The Christian mindset is an endless maze, and she gets lost in the shrubs every time. “So these people have no church anymore? Aunt Miriam had no church in her final days?” Of course, she cares nothing for such things herself, but she knows this church meant everything to her nostalgic aunt.

“The few families who remain in the area have joined the church in town, and your Aunt Miriam was settled in assisted living long before the matter was put to a vote. Please, Ms. Grisbone,” she feels her nose wrinkling involuntarily again, “do not be troubled. I cared for your aunt to the end.”

The uncomfortable stinging returns, and she blinks fiercely. “You’re out of a job, then.”

“I am retired, yes. Though the occasional committal or pulpit supply brings my clerical out of the drawer.”

“And the empty building? It just sits there?”

“She rests from her labors.” The reverend turns an affectionate eye toward the weary structure. “I like to think of her as a monument to God’s faithfulness to His people.”

Sally backward-sniffs at the irony.

“Verl opens the vestibule to ring the bell for interments, but beyond that, no one uses the church anymore. Though we did have some trouble with a crowd driving over from Macatowa last summer.” He wastes no time answering her raised eyebrows. “Some ruffians graffitied the north wall of the church, just under the windows.”

Of course they did.

The reverend’s shoulders begin to bounce with a chortle that sounds like marbles spilling onto linoleum. “Their intent was evil, no doubt, but Ms. Grisbone,” more marbles bounce across a kitchen floor, “vengeance is the Lord’s.”

No one can resist touching shiny marbles. “So what happened?”

“Well, the unfortunate artist surely intended to write ‘Satan’ across the exterior wall, but his phonetics must have been underdeveloped in life. For instead, he sprayed ‘Satin’ in large cursive red letters the entire length of the church. It was marvelous. Even the Lord laughed, I’m sure. Your Aunt Miriam and the Lindels rallied funds to repaint the exterior, though the front doors remain locked. But even tombs need tending.”

Against her will, Sally is fascinated by this little man, his bag of marbles, and his bizarre garden of tombstones. “I have a hard time believing only the outside of the church gets vandalized.”

“Well, I do think a wandering itinerant hops off the Greyville line now and then and sleeps in a back pew, but that happened even when the congregation was active. I admit,” he leans closer, lowering his voice, “I leave a key above the doorframe.”

The man is either daft or blinded by goodwill.

“The local youth don’t take advantage of that key?”

He shrugs. “What do youth care for keys to old churches these days when they already hold a digitized window to the world in their baby-hands? But even if they do know about the key, they don’t abuse it. Most are too short to reach it. If not of stature, then of wits. Besides, the church is called a sanctuary for a reason, Ms. Grisbone. Who are we to shut out those in need?”

“I would think that word gets around, even in a place as remote as this. Beggars have networks, you know.”

“*Wir sind alle Bettler.*”

“What?”

“We are all beggars,” the reverend translates. “Those words were found scrawled on a piece of paper on the body of the sainted Dr. Martin Luther on his deathbed.”

“I didn’t know he spoke German.”

The little man’s mouth stalls open for a confused second before lifting in a comprehending smile and arranging the wrinkles on his forehead in a perfect, colorless rainbow. “Ah, not Martin Luther King, my dear. Martin Luther. The reformer.”

“Oh.”

“Luther meant, I believe, that whatever our station is in life, we’re all beggars in need of God’s help.”

She looks at her watch. This sermon is already too long.

“What do you beg from God, Ms. Grisbone?”

Definitely too long. “Nothing.”

“I beg Him for everything.”

“You should beg him for a congregation.”

“But He has already provided me one.” He waves toward the nearby gravestones.

“You preach to the dead?”

“No, Christ does that. But I do plant them in the ground.”

“For what purpose?”

“To be harvested, of course. On the Last Day. Christ shall return in His glory and call my congregation from the ground. They shall see God with their own eyes and live with Him forever. He will change their ‘lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body.’” His eyes glisten. “Have you ever seen such a bumper crop?”

Sally is weary of the cold, and the elderly man’s antiquated worldview is growing tiresome, as well. “Cemeteries are a waste of space.”

“Then what shall we do with your remains, my dear?”

“I intend to be cremated. Scatter my remains over the sea.”

“Are you but fish food?”

“Are these people but fertilizer?” She doesn’t like the sound of her own voice. It’s too charged, too telling. She checks her excitement. “I’m just saying, leave the ground to care for the living. Save the dirt for something useful. This is middle America, after all. The richest farmland in all the world, right? Plant corn, not people. Reopen the church doors, and get some warm bodies in those pews.” Is she really giving a pep talk to a minister? Why is she lingering in the cold with this peculiar man? “Evangelize or whatever it is you do to make a congregation.”

“I cannot make a congregation. God builds His church. He calls to faith whom He calls.”

“With a marketing strategy like that, no wonder your church is dead.” She has gone too far this time, and she hastily redirects, “Who owns the land, anyway?”

“Why, Ms. Grisbone. I suspect you do. At least in part.”

“What?”

His bushy silver eyebrows furrow for the first time, and she suspects it is out of some kind of misplaced paternal concern. “Your family gifted this plot of land to the church when it was founded with the one stipulation that a Werth always sit on the church cemetery board. Your Aunt Miriam bore that responsibility of late, but now that Christ has called her to Himself, I am certain the board hopes you will pick up the family mantle.”

“But I live in Maine.”

“The board meets only quarterly.”

Is she to babysit a cemetery for the rest of her life? “You did not hear me, Father. I live in Maine.”

The reverend remains silent, thoughtful. In truth, his silence irritates Sally more than his preaching. For reasons she cannot understand, she wants to know what the man is thinking, but her captive interest feels embarrassingly like a weakness. When he finally does speak, each word is weighted with import. “The board holds the deed to the church and cemetery, but your Aunt Miriam owns the surrounding acreage west of Dandy Creek and south of the Fireling Road all the way to the Riverfield County line. You are her only living relative, Ms. Grisbone. Surely you expect to inherit the land.”

“Well, of course. That’s why I’m here. The will is being read this afternoon.”

“I should exhort you, then: You also inherit the care of its dead.”

Ludicrous, presumptuous little man.

“And what if I refuse?”

“Then, at the least, the boat of good order will be rocked. At the most, you will lose a charge that is precious to you, though you do not yet recognize it as such.”

Sally turns to leave.

“My dear,” his tone is sympathetic, which irritates her, “I know you are somewhat poking fun at my profession when you speak of evangelizing this area and reopening the church. Come, now, Ms. Grisbone. We are alike, you and me. Neither of us suffers fools. But you must see that your interest, whether sincere or in jest, comes honestly. ‘What do you have that you did not receive?’ Werths are written into more than just the constitution of this church and cemetery. This land holds your history, your very family. I do not think you can dismiss it so easily as you think.”

She dismisses the daft man easily enough, and as she makes her way back to the silver rental, she can’t help but think, as any good Mainer would, that the old church is a lighthouse, and the gravestones are its harbored ships. The tree line curving around the cemetery is a breakwater that keeps this rotting bay from any possible wave of enlightenment, and she—no matter what that old man says—is a boat destined to sail out of this port for good.