

A few pages from Chapter 6 of *Fate Moreland's Widow*:

Angus turned off for the lake and followed the winding road around to where we could see a big crowd. When we pulled up, there were four police cars parked along the narrow road, probably all that Hunter County had. Angus pulled the car behind them and we joined two dozen observers behind a ski rope the officers had stretched between two trees in front of the dock. A hundred yards out on the lake the police had hauled a floating dock and anchored it. Three men stood on the platform pulling heavy ropes.

“That’s the best they can make out where the three of them went down,” Angus said. “Those are grappling hooks they’re working with. They’ll bring something up.”

The crowd was perched like buzzards at all the high points along shore of the lake waiting for something to come up. Where was the regret in Angus McCane? Where was the sadness I’d expect from any human being over the death of not one but three men? I shook my head a little from side to side but thought better of displaying emotion when I realized Angus might detect on my face the depth of my discomfort.

While we were standing there one of the men hauled in his hook and even from a hundred yards away I could see the apparatus was covered with ghostly black brush and sticks from the bottom. He untangled the snarl of rotting vegetation on the hooks and cast them out once more into the lake in contrary directions.

“I’d say that my prurient rich neighbors have the best seats in the house,” Angus said, pointing to five expensive powerboats anchored a safe distance away from the scene. “They’ll let us know if they bring anything up. They’ll probably starting honking their horns.”

“That’s disgusting,” I said.

Angus laughed. “Don’t have much of stomach for the drama of the classes, do you, Ben?”

“There are dead men out there in the lake,” I said. “This is no high school play.”

“Well, they won’t have any peace until somebody snags ‘em and brings them to shore. Might as well enjoy the natural spectacle.”

“I don’t profit from other people’s suffering.”

“You’re missing it, Ben. There is a drama here and it’s Greek. Over there is the chorus,” he pointed to the crowd gathering behind the ski rope, “and over there in the motor boats sit Oedipus, Jocaste, and Creon, not even knowing what fates await them in act three.”

One of the sheriff’s deputies spotted Angus and walked over to speak. He was a lanky mountain boy with freckles. He wouldn’t look Angus in the eyes. The whole time the deputy stared off toward the dock floating off shore.

“Mr. Angus McCane,” he finally said, his face cocked toward the distance. “You got your brother outta jail yet?”

“We’re headed that way now,” McCane said. “Ben Crocker, this is the good deputy Abner Petty.”

Deputy Petty turned and looked my face over for a second too long, as if he wanted to make sure he’d recognize me if he ever saw me in a police lineup. “This is the first McCane we ever had in the county jail. He continued as he turned from staring at me, “well, the first besides Mr. Angus McCane here.”

“Those boys out there have got a lot of rope,” Angus said, changing the subject.

“It’s deep. Could be 75 feet where they went down.”

“What’s next if the hooks don’t catch something?”

“They’ll bring up a diver from Charleston,” he said. “The sheriff wants those bodies out of the lake.”

“A diver? Who’s paying for that?”

“We asked the family, but that lady said all their money’s at the bottom of the lake. You want to make a contribution in your family’s name? The church is taking donations.”

“Crocker, you got any money with you?”

“Twenty dollars,” I said, taking a bill out of the extra stash I’d brought beyond the money for the bail.

“Let’s make it forty,” Angus said, Angus took the twenty dollar bill from me and pulled out another twenty of his own. “You put this money in that diver fund. You tell the sheriff the McCanes made a contribution and that we hope he finds his bodies.”

“Oh, they’ll float up,” the deputy said. “They always do. You go on up there and get your brother out of jail.”

I wanted to turn around and go home and get out while I could, but Angus was driving and I was stuck doing McCane’s bidding. The rest of the way up to Huntersville the families of the dead kept appearing to me and I wondered who was caring for the wives and mothers of the two drowned men and I couldn’t stop thinking about that little dead boy at the bottom of the lake.

One winter when I was a boy the millpond froze over and I walked out to test the ice. That afternoon after school Ricky Bishop followed me out on the frozen pond. Ricky had moved in just moved in just the month before and my daddy said the Bishops had lost a child to the

Spanish flu. That's why they'd come up from Clinton. "They'd moved to Carlton to escape that shadow of that dead child hanging over them," Daddy had said.

Ricky and I walked out a few feet and stopped when the ice started to squeak. I stopped but Ricky walked on another dozen yards and the slick white sheet gave way and he plunged below. I turned and eased back to shore and got a stick, but I was afraid to go out on the ice far enough to use it to help Ricky. We were out at the brushy end of the pond, far from the street, so when I screamed nobody came.

Out on the pond Ricky tried twice to haul himself up out of the icy water. He never even glanced up at me. He kept his eyes focused on the icy edge like he was doing a last push up on a fitness test at the school. He slipped once off the slick watery edge and tried to heft himself up again right after. When he slipped the second time, he disappeared. I ran, a lot like I had imagined George McCane had done, and by the time two men came back from finding help at the pool hall, Ricky had slipped under.

They had to leave him there under the ice for most of that afternoon until the fire department found a rowboat to break a trail out twenty yards. The pond wasn't that deep where Ricky drowned. They didn't need hooks to recover him. I've always wished Ricky would have looked my way before he passed under the ice. Maybe he could have told me what to do, or how to help more than I did.