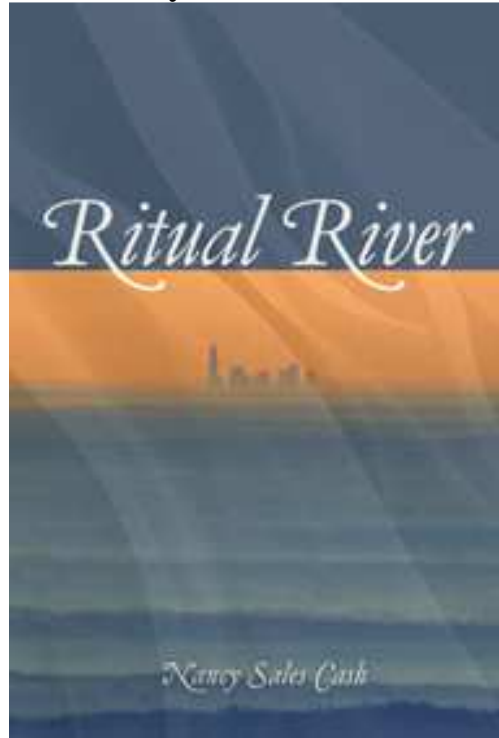


## **An Excerpt from “Ritual Rivers”**

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Anxious to find out how her brother was, Carol Mattox pushed open the door of the hospital room. But the sight of him gave her a terrible shock, as though someone – or something – had reached in, grabbed her heart, and twisted it.

Dimly she registered her family's presence. She tried to put on a smile, although she could feel it wobbling. "Phil, it's me, your pest of a sister. I got here as soon as I could." He'd been asking for her, and she had traveled such a long way to see him. Feeling a rare helplessness, she took his hand, and he opened his eyes.

But he began to moan, and struggled to raise himself. It was a mournful noise, and reminded Carol of things she'd heard in rituals related to her work. Automatically, the trained part of her mind tried to characterize the sound, note it for future reference.

Then, to her consternation, Phil fought to pull the oxygen line from his nose. When she tried to keep it in place, he blurted out, "I saw him!"

Puzzled, she bent closer. "Saw who?"

Phil shouted, looking past her, "That Indian! You'll know what to do about him."

Startled, Carol drew back.

"No, don't!" Screaming now, Phil lunged at her, his eyes wide and staring. "You'll kill me!" With surprising strength, he fastened trembling hands around Carol's neck, still without registering her presence.

With an effort, she pried loose his fingers and looked at the others, frightened.

Her mother said, scarlet lips shaking, "He keeps talking about it. Says he saw an Indian open the flood gate at the dam."

Carol's blood ran cold. "Could that have happened?"

"Of course not. Especially not an Indian wearing buckskins, with a gold nugget on a red hat." Marcie's lips now twisted with scorn. But the look she gave Carol's father was uneasy.

"He's just raving; it's the drugs they're giving him," Stanley Mattox pronounced. "Go along with it, like we do."

Phil collapsed back onto his bed and lay unmoving, now seeming barely conscious. What had he meant by, '*You'll know what to do?*' Carol wondered.

As she gazed in bewilderment at her parents, her grandmother whispered, "Don't pretend he doesn't know what he's saying. I'm telling you, the Mattox Curse has killed him, too!"

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