

PULP INTO PAPER

A Culminating Work submitted to the faculty of  
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Master of Fine Arts

In

Creative Writing: Teaching

by

Lenore Paula Weiss

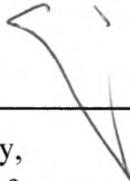
San Francisco, California

Fall 2017

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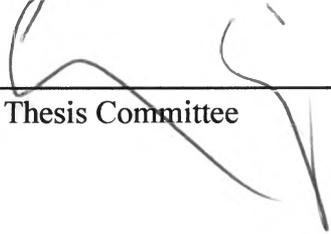
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PULP INTO PAPER

Lenore Paula Weiss  
San Francisco, California  
2017

Pulp into Paper is about the struggle of Arkansas and Louisiana mill workers to tell the truth about what is happening in their work and personal lives. The book mirrors the choices we make between earning a living and our ethical values, but is sympathetic to all characters on either side of the environmental divide.

I certify that the Annotation is a correct representation of the content of this written creative work.

  
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Chair, Thesis Committee

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## PREFACE AND/OR ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to my peers at San Francisco State University for their encouragement and support of my work, and to my teachers, Chanan Tigay, Peter Orner, Junse Kim, Anne Galjour, Matthew Clark Davison, and Troung Tran.

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“What is community? I submit it is not people of similar interests and goals, or even values, but rather, a far rarer thing, a place and time where against the scattering forces of the world people can stand together in the midst of their differences, sometimes the most intense differences, and still feel an affection for, and a commitment to, one another.”

*Chapter One—Hazardous Turnips*

Bryan Thurmond stood over six feet tall with salt and pepper hair beginning to thin on top and a cleft in his chin where his mother used to tell him that God had rested his finger before sending him down to earth.

Now he worked around reclamation ponds, a place where backhoes and four wheelers piled ash from the dregs of the paper mill into mounds that eventually got covered up with a layer of what the crew called cake. When there were enough layers, trucks covered it up with a red soil. Chemicals from the mill leached into the water and grew brown spongy things. Wild turnips waved their signature tops as he walked past them. A lot of guys laughed because he didn't pick the turnips; they didn't understand why he ignored nature's free bounty. They were like teenage boys who believed they'd never get sick. They didn't see the green tops as a warning.

As a young kid, he'd started out riding around in a bus that his band had bought from a hippie couple going to Kathmandu or some other godforsaken place. The couple had unloaded their car note and insurance payments on a group of kids who'd wanted to play at dive bars across the country and had pooled together enough money to buy the VW. Afterward, they gave the bus a spanking new paint job and got one of their girlfriends to write the name of the band, the Do Daddies, in large black letters on the side of the bus and spent the rest of the afternoon drinking cans of beer and swearing how Cora was the most talented artist who lived this side of the Mississippi. The guys repaired camper beds, built several new ones, installed lockers and a small refrigerator. Bryan kept them on

schedule, except one of the guys thought he'd have a pretty good shot at joining a construction crew that was building a new jail a few miles down the road from where he lived and told the boys Sayonara. The rest of them hung tight and high-fived each other thinking that the poor fuck had made a terrible mistake.

The first time they took off, the sound of Willie Nelson's *On the Road Again* coursed through their bloodstreams, unmoored from parents and schools that had sought to shape them into fine, upstanding citizens. Bryan was glad to be out from under the protective thumb of his adopted mother and her alcoholic husband, circumstances circumstancing in ways that he couldn't always predict, but that came later.

The band arrived in towns long enough to know where to find their buddies doing overnights at the Hall of Justice. They learned that music was about getting to the next gig, practicing runs and harmonies and looking out for each other on stage. Without dedicating themselves to music, they might as well pack up their guitar cases and go home. Every audience across the country wanted the same thing—to kick back after a long hard week of work and to enjoy themselves, but the band couldn't have a good time each and every night without that exacting a toll on their health and relationships. Music was a young man's life and life was no joke. Bryan was learning to stay put and to take care of the one place he called home.

Six months ago Rand-Atlantic had promoted Bryan to Lead Environmental Officer. Everything, up until today, had worked out just the way he'd planned. He could imagine Jenny sitting in a black cap and gown on the lawn and holding a diploma. They lived

together in a small ranch house in Louisiana tucked behind a red bud tree and a southern oak that spanned most of the back yard. Every weekend he cut grass and turned on the sprinklers. By now, the butterfly bush had just about touched the telephone wires with its clusters of dried brown knots. Rudbeckia that he'd planted two seasons ago was still blooming yellow and orange. Everything in the sunflower family did well, a tip from a friend who had a thumb for such things. Once Bryan rolled the lawnmower back into the shed, he'd indulge himself with a clear view of the bayou, a silver stretch of water where you could throw out a fishing line and still catch a spotted bass, loved to see the white egrets stalking mussels along the shoreline. If he looked long enough, he could see the flash of a snake or turtle, but not on this Monday. He had to drive to work in Arkansas and hoped there weren't too many big rigs on the road slowing down traffic. His boss had been out of town for a week. They had an emergency situation. Jenny grabbed her backpack from the kitchen table and was about to head out the door, but one of her straps caught on a chair and reeled her back in.

"Grab a piece of toast before you leave, why don't you?" She dismissed him with a swat of her hand. Jenny thought she knew everything. Bryan had been the same pigheaded way, but even so she was a sensitive girl, cried if she saw any cows being mistreated; made him watch dozens of documentaries about slaughtered animals, which hadn't turned her into a vegetarian, at least not just yet.

She untangled her backpack and shook out her blonde ponytail. Every day he thought she looked more like her mother, the same high cheekbones and shape of her ears, but it was

her quick, efficient movements that reminded him of the woman who had driven him into bankruptcy five years ago and left a Harry Potter scar across the face of his heart.

“No thanks. I’m not hungry.”

“Not good to start you day on an empty stomach,” he said. She went to high school where she was finishing up her senior year. He expected her to apply to community college and then hopefully get a scholarship to LSU.

“So what do you call cigarettes and coffee?”

“I bought a box of patches. Don’t you remember? You put them in my glove compartment.”

“Great. When are you going to start using them?”

She was a teenager and that’s what teenagers did: made their parents’ lives a living hell. Sometimes he wished Gail were still here, he had a hard time being mom and dad. He wanted to provide for her what he never had. The divorce hadn’t helped. He’d thrown himself into millwork, swore he would not recreate the same pattern that had shaped his adopted family. In court, the judge said that she was willing to reconsider the case, but only if Gail served 18 months for selling prescription drugs with follow-up from her parole officer. Since then, they had been living in Louisiana, faced each other every morning over a Formica table decorated in last year’s cigarette burns. Bryan spread a slice of toast with butter. “Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.”

Jenny rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. “Every morning you say the same stupid thing.”

“That’s ‘cause you never eat.”

“C’mon, Dad. I’m not three years old. I know how to take care of myself.” He pushed a plate of toast her way. Jenny bit off a crescent of bread and chewed, crumbs stuck in between her teeth. “I texted her yesterday.”

“Who?”

“You know. Gail...”

“At least drink a some orange juice.” Her ponytail flipped him off as she dashed out the screen door. On her way she stuck her hand into a bag of potato chips and licked the salt from her fingers. She had just turned seventeen. The thought of Gail reentering their lives soured the coffee that swirled inside his stomach.

“Wait a sec!” he called from the porch. He’d forgotten to tell her that he was working a second shift and was going to be home late. She pulled out of the carport in a Pontiac that he’d bought cheap at a police sale, equipped with new struts and brakes that he’d paid for out of his own pocket. He waved and went back into the house to pack his lunch. He’d leave her a note, but before he did, wanted to straighten up a few things, put away dishes, and throw in a load of wash. Bryan checked the clock to see if he had enough time. Being late for work was never an option.

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Bryan worked at Rand-Atlantic, a paper mill in southern Arkansas at the head of Route 82, where truckers delivered loblolly pines, trees up to one hundred feet tall, to meet their

final death by chemical process. The resulting product, besides tissue and toilet paper, was wastewater dumped into a nearby stream. Hardly anyone remembered when it flowed clean. It used to be called the Silver River. Now everyone referred to it as the Mud River that belched forth something like melted big-rig tires along the river's shore. Not many people came here, except for those who lived along the Mud or the River Watchers, a group of locals who badgered Rand-Atlantic about plant safety.

Bryan's boss complained that the River Watchers were do-gooders who focused on a single thing without understanding the big picture. Vernon said you had to be a big picture sort of guy, had promoted Bryan from hired hand to team leader because he could see beyond the black and white, especially when there were jobs that mattered. But now that he'd been promoted, Bryan felt as though he was getting pressured to overlook certain things. Not directly pressured. The company wouldn't be that stupid.

Encouragements to step over the line came in the form of free passes to the Rodeo Club and murmurs of a scholarship for his daughter to attend junior college. He had just passed probation, but everything at this particular moment had gone to shit—hydrogen sulfide registering out of the park. If Bryan were going to press his case to Vernon about dangerous levels, there had to be no margin for error. He recalibrated his meter and got ready to double-check his readings. He had to be sure and looked for the best way to get down to the river, a portable gas detector heavy in his backpack. A morning needle of light appeared red and pink on the horizon. The slow-moving Mud had been transformed from an arthritic elder into a young woman. Locked in its embrace, the fog didn't want to let go of the water. Maybe he hadn't consumed enough coffee, and his eyes were tricking

him into seeing a cache of diamonds. He cantered down. Bryan looked more closely. Fish and Wildlife had stocked the Mud with catfish. That must be it. The catfish floated in a parade twenty and thirty abreast, jockeying with each other to move along to the next row. Fish and hunting clubs would be out in full force this August weekend. They'd have a catfish festival. Outdoor propane stoves would be set up to fry buckets of fish. Maybe he'd drag his Gibson from the closet and get together with Jay to play some of the old standards from their Do Daddy days. He moved closer toward the water; the fish had gone belly-up, and it was a funeral procession. The stench invaded his nostrils; hundreds of dead fish sickened the air. Suddenly, he heard voices—two boys bicycling along the Mud.

“Looks like a war movie,” they cried out. “Bam! Bam! Bam!”

“Got my gun!” The tall boy pointed a fishnet toward the water. “Follow me! C'mon.” Letting go of his handlebars, the boy pedaled down toward the water. “Lookit all these fish, Rincon. Wow! We gonna catch 'em.”

“Wow! We gonna catch 'em,” echoed the younger boy. “They so shiny!”

“Where's that plastic bag I gave you?”

“Gave it back to you, Carson.”

“No, stupid, you put it in your jacket.”

“Not there.”

“Did you lose it?” asked the older boy. “Now what we gonna do?”

“Slow down. Stop pedaling so fast.” His breath came in short bursts.

“No, you hurry up!” Rincon pedaled faster, but the front wheel of his bike caught and stuttered on the rocks. “I told you to stay home, didn’t I? Now Grandma’s gonna whip your ass.”

“Shut up. It stinks out here. Did you fart?” asked Rincon.

“That was you!”

“Liar!”

“Who’s calling who a liar?”

“Whew!” Rincon weaved off his bike, and his front wheel smashed into a tree.

“Dizzy...the smell.”

“Stop playing,” said his older brother. “I didn’t fart. This ain’t funny!”

Rincon fell, his head pointed down toward the river.

“You clowning” asked Carson.

Rincon wheezed. Tremors shook his body.

“I ain’t playing,” said the older boy. “Get up! Grandma’s gonna be hecka mad.” He jumped off his bike. “You told me you’d be okay. You promised!”

Rincon’s chest convulsed. “Don’t feel good.”

“Playing sick,” said Carson. “That’s what you do.” He kicked a few pinecones. Rincon rolled back and forth. Drool spilled from the side of his mouth. He reached for his brother’s hand, but instead, the older boy picked up his bicycle. “C’mon Rincon. Get up now. Please. I ain’t playing.”

Rincon’s face was turning a funny color. “Can’t.”

“Always needing to go to the hospital.” He bent down and picked up the younger boy’s bicycle. Rincon kept gasping. “Always wanting attention.” Rincon shook his head. “A baby, that’s what you are. C’mon, Rincon. You can’t be sick. Not now.” The other boy clawed the ground. “Please, Rincon. You gonna get us both in trouble. Won’t tell grandma you had an attack. Promise. Please, Rincon. You gotta get up. Don’t get sick.”

Bryan ran behind the older boy. “You need help, son?”

“It’s my brother.” Rincon gagged. “He’s being attacked! Attacked!”

“You live near here?”

Carson pointed through the trees. “With Grandma.”

“C’mon, hurry.” He could see the younger boy was in trouble, but stayed calm. He had rescued band members from hangovers and drug overdoses also from cops who threatened to arrest the Do Daddies for smoking marijuana in towns needing to collect tax revenue. He could go to the hospital, but wasn’t sure that was a good idea. There was the older boy, and then he’d be getting mixed up in other people’s business that wasn’t his business, but it wasn’t about that anyway, he told himself, and heard a cloud of sirens

from a place that lived in the back of his head, pulling him away from his mother and father inside a smoking car, taking him forever away.

The older boy said they lived close by.

The sick boy couldn't have been more than nine years old, maybe ten. Bryan picked him up, laid him down on the back seat, and pushed an orange hazard vest beneath his head. "Sit down, son," he coaxed the older boy. Bryan swept empty coffee cups to the floor. He put the Tundra in reverse and backed out to the main road. He knew he had to hurry. The sick boy lay on his back seat, his body in spasms, a splotch of blood appeared at the edge of his mouth.

"He got asthma bad."

Bryan nodded. "Your name's Carson? Your house far?" He hoped it wasn't. The steering wheel felt tacky, his hands damp.

"Make a turn over there. Left." The boy made circles in the air with his finger. He sat at the edge of his seat, rigid, almost trying to push the truck forward with his body.

Bryan pulled into the driveway of a wood frame house. He kept looking over his shoulder at Rincon on the back seat whose eyelids were flickering, his head held sideways. "Talk to your brother. Keep him awake." Bryan was sorry he hadn't told Carson to sit in the back. There was a single tree in the front yard. Several leaves dangled from its branches. Grass grew in isolated bunches along an unpainted fence that separated the house from the Mud River. The path to the door was lined in white round stones. Yellow and red

plastic poinsettias wound around the carport poles. Before the truck came to a complete stop, Carson jumped out. Bryan scooped up Rincon from the back seat. The boy's feet and hands flopped over his arms.

The boys' grandmother opened the screen door. "You two boys! Where you been? You know I have to get to work." She was a tall black woman with high cheekbones, her hair wrapped in a green turban.

"The catfish, Grandma, we were gonna..."

She saw Bryan holding Rincon. She ran toward him. "Oh my God. What's wrong?"

"Ma'am, I came across Rincon near the bridge. Needs to get to the hospital fast."

"Carson, run inside and get his inhaler. I've told you a thousand times not be out early when the fumes are worse." She took out her cellphone. "Have to call." She shook her head. "They not gonna like this. She shouted at Carson. "Get my purse, car keys. Bryan stood there holding Rincon. "Where'd you come from? Who are you?" She pointed a red fingernail like a spike aimed at his chest.

"Bryan Thurmond, ma'am."

Carson stuck his head out the screen door. "Don't know where it is!" He was almost crying, his face pinched, eyebrows furrowed, nearly squeezing his eyes shut. "I can't find it, Grandma."

"Forgot," she said. "Rincon left his breather at church!"

“Nell Roberts.” She introduced herself quickly and talked on the cellphone in an agitated voice. “I told you...I have to get him to the hospital. I’m sorry. No, I’m not making this up. I’ll get there when I can. Who did you think you’re talking to?” She threw her phone into her purse. “Can you believe it? Told me I’ve used up my sick time. What am I supposed to do? And they call themselves Christians.”

“On the back seat.” She directed Bryan to lay Rincon down and grabbed a plaid blanket from her trunk. His hands were trembling. “Keep him warm. Use this,” she told Bryan. She held onto Rincon’s hand.

“Can I call 911 for you?”

“We’ll get there faster. Carson, look for his medicine. An orange bottle top. In the kitchen.”

“I’ll drive you,” he said. The hospital was about twenty-five minutes away.

“We can do this ourselves.”

Bryan looked at Rincon. A thread of vomit oozed from his mouth. Bryan hoped that the emergency room wasn’t crowded. By this time, Rincon’s skin had turned dusty pale. “I’ll follow,” Bryan hollered as she got behind the wheel of her Silverado.

“No, no.” She gestured through the window. “It’s all right. Cal is meeting us. My husband. Carson, sit with your brother and hold his hand.”

“But Grandma...”

“Can I do anything else?”

She shook her head. “Get your truck out of the way.” She rolled up her window and went into reverse, tires spinning hard on gravel.

Bryan sat in his cab, aware that several people had opened their doors, pointing at him and his Tundra. It was time to leave. He returned to where the boys had thrown their bikes and eased them into his trunk, one on top of the other. He lit a cigarette and watched the smoke spiral upward like a prayer. He told himself he’d done everything he could, a stranger in a largely black area of Hentsbury where the ponds emptied their muck.

Bryan had almost forgotten why he had driven out to the bridge in the first place. He had taken out his metering equipment and climbed down to where one of the ponds spilled into the Mud River. The hydrogen sulfide levels were out of the park, over two hundred parts per million. Safe levels were at five parts. Men exposed to high doses were lucky not to keel over from convulsions. He’d seen pictures like that in his courses. Sure, they were posed pictures. But he knew the symptoms. First exposed men would get headaches. Soon they’d lose their sense of smell, unable to detect the presence of the gas. But this was no longer textbook stuff—readings were in the red zone. Come to think of it, he wasn’t feeling too great himself.

Bryan returned the bikes to Rincon’s house and drove back to the plant. He moved his crew as far from the wastewater ponds as possible. Vernon had left Bryan specific instructions not to contact him unless it was an emergency. “I’m going to be gone all

week. No cellphone reception.” The company’s corporate environmental team was meeting at a hunting lodge in the backwoods of Arkansas, presumably to launch a new publicity campaign, but hunting and getting fucked up were always part of the program. He assumed that Vernon had a mailbox at the lodge and faxed him the readings.

In the evening, Bryan sat on the couch and watched American Idol. They had finished dinner in front of the TV, pigs-in-a-blanket with a few tomatoes from the garden. Jenny was in her bedroom writing an essay for school. Those lucky kids were on national television with promoters waiting in the wings to snap them up and sign record contracts. Music was a young man’s game. His mind drifted back to the boys on their bicycles—Carson scared out of his mind bent over his brother—their grandmother driving to the hospital and telling him to get out of the way.

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“He almost died,” said Nell. “Yes, he’s still at the hospital. I told those damned kids not to go near the bridge. But do you think they would listen? D’you think they ever do? I can beat their sorry butts for bike riding around that late. Carson came and got me with some white man. Told him you were meeting us. He was all right, tried to help. I took Rincon to the hospital. He’s on medication. When can you get home? I know it’s a long drive. This weekend? Sure, it always stinks out there, but the smell is getting worse. How should know what they’re doing? It’s not like they call and ask my permission. See if you can get home sooner, Cal. Sure, I’ll tell him. Love you, too.” She remembered holding Rincon’s hand in the hospital, her fingers covering his own. Rincon had opened

his eyes and smiled, but hadn't said anything. After the phone call, she prayed, "Please God. Don't take him from me." Carson wandered out of the bedroom in his pajamas and asked for a glass of water.

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The next morning, Bryan stared into his coffee cup.

"What's up?" Jenny asked.

"What do you mean?" Bryan lifted his eyes from the headlines.

She drank her orange juice. "Aren't you gonna tell me how I'm going to shrivel and die unless I eat breakfast?"

"I would tell you that."

"C'mon, Dad." A layer of grease floated on the surface of his coffee. Maybe the dishwasher needed to be fixed. "Work," he said. "Something's come up."

"Not giving me the usual lecture?" She slid a water bottle into her backpack and slid her books inside. "Totally not your style."

"How's school?"

"Be real."

The next day after he'd finished his shift, he pulled up to Nell's house along the Mud and knocked on her door. "Miss Roberts?"

“Who’s there?”

“Bryan Thurmond. Remember me from yesterday? How’s your boy?”

She opened the door and came outside. “I’m leaving right now. The hospital says he’s critical.”

“Anything I can do? Anything.”

“Look, Mr. Thurmond. That’s your name, isn’t it? I know you’re a good man and I appreciate your bringing Rincon over here. Not every man in your position would’ve done that.” She saw his green parka. “You work for Rand-Atlantic, don’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“So do I. Or at least I used to. You really want to know what you can do?”

He nodded, wanted to help, do anything.

“Tell Rand-Atlantic to stop dumping their poison in our backyard. Maybe they’ll listen to you. They sure won’t listen to any of us who live out here.”

Nell stood there waiting for his answer, both hands bracketing her hips, and through them, Bryan could see the Mud River.

He had a job and his own family. He stepped backward toward his truck. “Ma’am, I hope your boy gets better real soon.”

*Chapter Two—Vernon*

Vernon was old enough to be his father—a compact man with a collection of scars from scrapes with men twice his size. Around him, Bryan felt reverential, almost like he was sitting in church listening to the man preach, as close to a real father as he was ever going to get. Vernon was a better talker than listener. Even so, there was a bond between the two men—both were single dads, fathers of daughters, and they knew about failed marriages, but that didn't stop Vernon from chasing the ladies. He liked to look good and every month he got his nails manicured and bought clothing from an upscale online retailer. Vernon said he didn't want wear any foreign imports because the seams fell apart, and couldn't understand why quality had gone at of style. A clipped lawn of speckled hair covered his scalp. Scars on his calves were souvenirs from growing up in rough areas of east Texas. Vernon had promoted Bryan to be second-in-command, and was wiping his forehead with a white towel. “Don't they have air conditioning in this freaking place or what? What a sweatbox. Your office any better?”

His office was half the size and without a window. “No, sir. Worse.”

“So what can we do about it, Thurmond? Nothing.” Vernon's office was around the corner from his own on the third level of the admin building. Bryan stood there and listened to the air conditioner shudder and rattle. Already it was hot. “Damn thing don't even work.” Vernon lit a cigarette. “You know how my mother paid electric bills every

summer? I'll tell you. By forbidding me from ever turning on the air-conditioning.

Whenever I even tried to touch the thermostat, she'd slap my hand. Bet you can't guess what I did?"

Bryan ventured, "Ice baths, dunks in the river?"

"Shit. What do I look like? Hung out in bars from noon until night and with girls whose parents ran air-conditioning full blast all summer. Got to go to their houses. Back then I told myself, once I leave home I'll be able to turn on the air-conditioning whenever I damn well pleased. Left as soon as I turned sixteen."

"Guess Texas was a lot hotter than Arkansas."

"Laredo? South central Texas? You shitting me? You know what people say about frying an egg on a sidewalk? You could barbecue a whole side of ribs on the interstate. Some people brought along homemade sauce. Best ribs ever." Vernon laughed. "I'll let you in on a little secret. Didn't know that it was gonna take so long for me to buy an conditioning unit that actually worked. Went to truck driving school. Then Dina and I got married. Next, Noreen came along. Ever think of getting married?" Bryan told Vernon he didn't think so. "Sometimes when I'm sitting on the couch in front of the TV watching the Saints play the Patriots, I'd like to have a lady sitting at my side. Get a cold beer and turn up the air conditioning...and if you really want to know, got my eyes on a pretty little filly." Bryan hoped he wasn't dating another women half his age. He hated to see his boss make a fool of himself. "Be nice to lie down next to a woman. It's been a long

time.” He ended his reverie. “You still standing there? How come? Take a load off, Thurmond. Anything important happen while I was traipsing around in the woods?”

Bryan got ready to do his two-step. He wanted to let his boss know exactly what was happening, but he also knew that Vernon was angling for a promotion with the company bosses, hoped to have his own parking spot and an air conditioner in the Atlanta corporate office. But there were those two boys on their bicycles, and last week, one of his crewmembers had gone to the infirmary.

“What is it, man? Cat got your tongue?” He wanted to alert Vernon to what was happening. “Thurmond, what is it? Another shitload of documentation?”

“Sir, the H<sub>2</sub>S levels near the bridge are high. Higher than I’ve ever seen.” Bryan pushed a report across Vernon’s desk.

His boss adjusted his glasses, glanced at the papers, and pushed them back. “Tell me what I don’t already know.”

“I’m concerned about the levels.”

“Look at me, Thurmond. Do I look stupid? I’ve faxed the first group of readings to Atlanta. Perlson already has them.” Tray Perlson was the head environmental honcho from the corporate office. The Hentsbury plant was not by any stretch Perlson’s, favorite operation, one of the oldest in the company’s arsenal dotting the United States like polyps. “Perlson’s no dummy.” Vernon crossed his arms on his desk. “Let me tell you, Thurmond. Less than fifty miles from where I live, back in the 1990s there was a plant

explosion that killed ten people, plus the shift supervisor. The EPA came in and charged the company with 82 safety violations. All that's left is a granite plaque with the names of the dead. It's down near the library. Take a look sometime. See if I'm wrong. Another company stepped in and bought the place, smoothed things over, until no one even remembered the explosion. That's how it always is. People have short memories. No need to whoop and holler. But I'm no dummy. If I didn't report these readings, Atlanta would give me the third degree. The company's been getting heat lately from those River Watchers and they don't want the pilot light to be turned up any higher. You do your job, son, but don't tell me how to do mine. Okay? You got it? We got it." He smiled like a man who had just finished a big lunch. Vernon was focused on Rand-Atlantic's liability—if it looked like a bunch of lawyers needed to get involved in anything, he called in the big dogs. Bryan figured he'd better break the news.

"There's something else."

"Yes?"

"There's fish."

"What do you mean, fish?"

"When I surveyed the ponds in the back forty the other day, I saw a lot of catfish floating on the Mud River." To make sure his point hit home, Bryan said, "They were dead."

"Of course they were dead. Do I look like I'm stupid?"

“No, sir.” It was bad enough if he had spotted shad, perch, or brim. But catfish were bottom feeders, scavengers that could survive anything, that is, except poison. Actually, there weren’t supposed to be any fish at all, which is how Rand-Atlantic had twisted the EPA’s arm so the company could use the Mud River as their personal dumping ground.

“I had the crew scoop them out with nets.”

Vernon’s eyes brightened like a child’s. “What did you do with them?”

Bryan hoped this wasn’t a trick question. “What do you want me to do with them?”

“How many fish are we talking?”

Truckloads of fish floated before his eyes. “Hundreds.”

“Have your guys bury them in the ash piles. Maybe the stink will cover up the hydrogen sulfide.”

He couldn’t imagine how the fish were going to smell in the August heat. Bryan knew that those River Watcher people would crucify Vernon, especially if they found more fish floating down the river belly up. “It’ll probably take a day to get them out of there.”

“The company has a new campaign,” Vernon said. “Photos from inside and outside the plant that show how we’re partnering with the community. My idea. Good idea. We work at a paper mill. Does everyone want to wipe their ass with newspaper like they do in other countries? This is the United States, for God’s sake. Why would anyone want to blow a nose into the headlines? Whiners. Son, better not let those River Watchers get

close enough to anything. Last time they did, never heard the end of it from the good people in my church. And Atlanta wasn't too friendly either."

Rand-Atlanta could pacify the EPA by paying hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines, but they hated anything that smelled of publicity. Bad news spreads like wildfire.

"Shut off their access."

"See what I can do, sir."

Bryan knew what he had to do first—make sure there weren't any more fish floating down the Mud. They would be caught at the lower basin where the river fed into the Ouachita near the Louisiana border. This was part of the ArkLaMiss, where three states—Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi—were bonded together for the convenience of regional weather reports and the Army Corps of Engineers. Bryan paced outside. The hot humid air punched him in the face. Another scorcher.

The wild turnips were lush, grew behind the parking lot alongside the entrance to the plant, bright green tops interlaced with red veins that waved in the afternoon heat like feathers of a peacock's tail. Flow Gently Sweet Afton. Bryan had seen dozens of peacocks in the parking lot of the zoo where he dropped off Jenny—peacocks strutting like they were collecting fees. Nothing scared them except for the sound of a car's ignition. Bunkers of turnips survived like that. They didn't care if the groundwater or the soil were polluted. It reminded Bryan of science experiments he had done as a kid, sticking a stalk of celery in water and watching the red dye travel up to the very top.

Turnips flourished in the muck and grew everywhere. Jenny texted him and said she would be getting a lift home from school with a friend. Bryan reminded himself to stop and pick up a carton of milk. She couldn't eat cereal in the morning if there wasn't milk.

He arrived at the bridge again and saw a woman about two hundred yards away taking pictures with a telephoto lens. His head hurt, the way it did sitting in the exhaust of heavy traffic. "Hello, ma'am. What do you think you're doing?" She was a head shorter than Bryan, probably in her late forties, not much older, a cap pulled down over her forehead, hair sticking out like fuzz along the sides of her ears with two sumac-colored strands hanging down her back, long fibrous braids.

The woman looked up, and loosened a red kerchief covering her mouth. "Helping my granddaughter with a school project."

"Lucky girl. What kind of project?"

"Science class."

Bryan put on his public face to appear genuinely intrigued. He also played a fair hand of poker. "Find anything? Rattlers? Raccoons?"

The woman shook her head. "Nothing like that. Just taking a few pictures."

He could've sworn that she'd batted her eyelashes, but she didn't even know him, figured she was just trying to catch him off guard. He remembered seeing her picture at the library. She had given talks at the community center. "Look, ma'am. We both know you're not supposed to be here."

She crossed her arms, chin raised, stood up on her hind legs chattering like a red fox squirrel. “Who says?”

“You’re on Rand-Atlantic property.” He pointed to a sign tacked at the edge of the bridge.

“I’m standing in the middle of the bridge. Hentsbury starts right here.” She pointed to the rotting wood and drew an imaginary line with her finger.

“No, ma’am. I think you may be wrong about that.” Bryan wished to move her back over the bridge. He could see her black Cherokee nestled behind a scaffolding of birch trees.

“You work for Rand-Atlantic?”

He took out his ID badge and showed it to her. “I sure do.”

“I’m happy for you. But for your information, this is not company property. It’s public property and I have a right do whatever I want here, and neither you nor Mr. Rand-Atlantic can tell me anything different.” She cradled the camera back inside her backpack and pointed toward the catfish.

“You see those fish? That’s a crying shame.” She picked up her gear and walked toward her Jeep, shaking her head. One last time she turned around. “You better be careful, mister, whether you work for Rand-Atlantic or not. Last week, a boy died out here.”

Bryan winced. “A boy?” He zipped up his parka.

“It’s been in the papers.”

He'd been overwhelmed by the events of the last few days, hadn't even done so much as set in front of the TV to watch the evening news. Company property started on the other side of the bridge; he could see she was standing there and writing down something, which is why Rand-Atlantic was building a fence that extended east and west of the Mud River. Bryan thought about copying her license. She'd disappeared before he'd got out his cell. Anyway you looked, this couldn't be good—not good for Rand-Atlantic, Hentsbury, and certainly not for Bryan.

The crew dumped ash over a layer of cake, dozers hypnotic in a steady back and forth; the water below them was streaked orange and lime-green, coagulated with the roots of invasive lilies. The ponds smelled like a tower of smoldering newspaper with bad headlines. Bryan removed his sunglasses and wiped them dry, looked at his face in the side-view, a mosaic of dust where sweat had dripped into his eyes and down over his mustache.

He drove back to the break room, filled with men and a few women who were emptying packets of sugar and non-dairy creamer into their cups. There was a line at the microwave; he smelled popcorn mixed with the sweating grease of burritos. A fluorescent light fixture blinked on and off over the break room clock.

He picked up a newspaper from several days ago that someone had abandoned on a table; coffee circles stained its front page. Bryan scanned it quickly and didn't like what he saw. He tucked the paper beneath his arm and returned to his office.

His desk was braced on either side by a row of grey metal filing cabinets. Inside were records from the past ten years. It was one of his pet projects to create a searchable database. But lately, that project had slipped to the bottom of his pile. He studied a map of Rand-Atlantic's property tacked to the wall, a visual of how the plant formed almost two-thirds of Hentsbury. Bryan tried to see where the River Watchers had entered the property. He traced each division and dragged his finger along a maze of detention ponds and back roads. There was Hentsbury Lake to the west, Millyard Road to the north, Supply Line Drive to the east, and Shields Arena, an outdoor baseball park named after the mill's first manager who had master-minded its purchase, to the south. Bryan had read all about the company's history, which was included in every new employee's packet. After investors had bought an option to build a sawmill, Shields went into high gear, capturing acres of land cheap from local farmers so the mill would have a ready supply of raw materials. All the landowners thought that Shields was a madman. Later Rand-Atlantic bought the mill and took over operations, which is why Bryan's map looked the way it did. The north wing made tissue paper, another area made coated paperboard. He was in charge of the detention or wastewater ponds that treated runoff from all those divisions.

Bryan took out the newspaper and opened it again, just to be sure.

Back page. Obituaries. The boy's name blotted out everything.

"Rincon Roberts, 9, died at Mercy Hospital, 3 p.m., August 21." Information followed about his school and grade and a quote from one of his teachers, "Rincon was a bright

boy who loved animals.” There were only details about the funeral, no cause of death.

Bryan lit a cigarette, burned a round hole through the middle of the page, sat there and burned another. Two empty eyes stared back at him.

Rincon Roberts was dead.

### Chapter Three—Israelites in the Desert

Every year Jeannette grew tomatoes. Last year they didn't have a big crop, but this year the plants had died. Every single last one. Deacon Turner stood behind his home in Hentsbury. Sure, there had been days of over ninety degrees, but this was Arkansas, and if Jeannette couldn't grow tomatoes, nobody could. Her tomatoes were as sweet as sugar. Everybody at church said so. Maybe it was an insect pest.

“Dirksen, hurry inside.”

Dirksen edged his way to the couch that was surrounded by a fortress of Jeannette's art projects, crocheted Afghans and canvases, painted flowers in bold colors. Dirksen and Jeannette were on disability, her arthritic hands and his bad back. She sat in their living room and watched TV.

“She's a member of the River Watchers.”

“Who's a member of what?”

“Hush.”

“Woman, you asked me to come inside, so don't be hushing me.”

“Just listen to yourself,” said Jeannette.

“I'll talk as much as I want!”

Lila Shawn was being interviewed. “The water from the Ouachita is filled with carcinogens nobody should be drinking, especially young children. The chemicals are in concentrations that the federal government says is harmful.”

The TV reporter flashed a look of appropriate interest and asked a question for which he was later reprimanded. “How do you think that happened?”

“The run-off from Rand-Atlantic paper mill is leaching into the Ouachita. The River Watchers have collected samples. If you can’t afford to drink bottled water, phone your parish’s Police Jury.” She gave her contact information.

Jeannette said, “We gotta talk to that woman.”

“I’m writing down her number. You gonna call?”

Deacon Turner and Jeannette had been organizing their church about the pools of foul-smelling water that collected in a ditch behind their community. He’d grown up in Delhi, Louisiana as a minister’s son. Other kids feared he might tattle about their impious thoughts or erratic behavior, how they stole from each other’s desks and told terrible stories about each other’s mamas. To make matters worse, his teachers had assigned him to a front row seat in a room filled with children who routinely broke the lead of their pencils. But Dirksen’s pencil was always sharp.

“Dirksen, can you lend that good-for-nothing in the third row one of your pencils?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he’d say, and retrieve one from below his desk while the boy in the third row gave him a particularly ugly look as he snatched the pencil from Dirksen’s hand.

He could have always told his teachers he didn't have any, but Dirksen wasn't much practiced at lying. Sometimes at night he lay in his bed and wondered what it would be like to make a pact with the devil in exchange for the power to burn his detractors to charcoal bits. Guilt overtook him. He tried to exchange his dreams for ones with him sitting at King Arthur's roundtable laden with cold milk and platters of fried chicken and turnip greens. Dirksen saw himself holding a silver cup, Christ's chalice, or maybe it was gold. Sadly, his dream didn't last. Dirksen had another problem. Not only was he the minister's son, but he also was fat. If any new kid arrived at school, Dirksen's girth was the first thing they saw. Piggy Cheeks and Sausage Fingers were some of the nicer names the other kids called him. He never told his parents because he couldn't stand the humiliation of his mother reassuring him that he was chubby, not fat. Dirksen kept to himself, which made the kids tease him even more about how he was stuck up.

Dirksen's daddy was the minister of the local Baptist church, a dour man whose stomach served as padding between him and the pulpit. Dirksen knew that his father counted on him to carry on the family tradition, a line of Turners that stretched back to the days of the Underground Railroad. All men in his family had gone into the ministry. He'd heard that same story over and over, a hundred times.

Dirksen had been routinely uninterested in saving souls. He didn't know what was wrong with him; he had an undiagnosed malady that he medicated with figs and peaches from his parents' backyard.

Maybe the Turners had already saved their quota of souls. But that didn't stop Minister Turner from telling everyone that his son was studying for a career in the service of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. Whenever his father talked like that, Dirksen wished he had an older brother. Dirksen knew he could never measure up. It wasn't lack of ambition so much as it was an understanding of his own limitations, which was admirable for a boy his age.

After Sunday services, several church members pointed to his father and said, "There burns a bright candle and you stand in the middle of its shining light." Everyone admired Turner Senior and always had a story to tell about how he'd done this or that amazing thing, which made it even harder for him. Then there was Uncle Mikey, his father's younger brother who had strayed from the path and seemed to be doing just fine. He was a light-skinned man with brown moles that dotted his nose and made half moons around his eyes. He and Dirksen wore the same shoe size and Dirksen wanted to follow in his footsteps, that is, as far as he could away from his father's church.

Cal arrived in town when both boys were in junior high school. His mother had passed away when Cal was a baby. Cal was tall and gangly with skin the color of polished cypress. He and his Aunt Theresa moved into a ramshackle house that supposedly had belonged to Cal's mother, who had died a few years after his birth. Aunt Theresa had problems with her teeth and used a poultice of cinnamon mixed with oils to ease the throbbing in the back of her mouth. She was too vain to go toothless; however, the town dentist did not believe in offering his few black patients painkillers, which meant that she spaced out appointments. The nearest office of a black dentist was in Baton Rouge, more than a hundred miles away. Aunt Theresa lived on her late husband's miniscule pension.

Between gum infections and feeding Cal on a limited budget, she was often in a sour mood. However, the dentist had a sharp business eye and saw a future customer in Cal's gleaming teeth. With that in mind, he allowed him to take home magazines from his office. All issues were at least five years old and on subjects no one wanted to read. Otherwise, the dentist would have thrown them out.

Cal had been assigned the empty seat behind Dirksen in the first row, a seat that had been vacated by a boy whose family had moved after he had nearly been shot by a white man who couldn't stand that a black boy had a pair of new sneakers. Anyhow, it was Cal's first day in the classroom and everyone was looking busy.

Cal tapped Dirksen on the shoulder. "Forgot my pencil."

Dirksen sighed. He reached to the bottom of his desk and drew out a stub; the eraser had been worn flat, and teeth marks were visible along its edges. Dirksen's supply was running low; this was his last one. He exchanged the stub for the pencil that he held between his fingers, and gave it to the boy, who sat several heads taller. They talked on the way home. "What's your name?"

"Cal."

"Cal what?"

The boy shrugged. "Cal Roberts." He even returned Dirksen's pencil, something that no one had ever done. "I forgot to give this back to you."

After school they began to meet in front of Dirken's uncle's Fiesta Party House and hoped that Uncle Mikey would offer them free popsicles, something he did on rare occasion, reminding the malingerers, "What do you think this is? I'm running a business, not a welfare office." They retracted inside their collars. "I'll tell you what. If you want to stack those boxes and sweep the floor, we can talk." His uncle paid in popsicles, usually orange or lime-flavored, or occasionally, a grape one, sweet and sticky in their mouths.

They argued about who was going to stack and who was going to sweep until Uncle Mikey nailed them with a rusty eye. "Stop fussing. Boxes one week," he said, pointing at Dirksen, "and next week sweeping. Everything better get cleaned good. Don't want to see a leaf or a cobweb floating around. And those boxes better be stacked as straight as a razor's edge. Hear?" Uncle Mikey turned toward a man who had just entered the store to buy a pack of cigarettes.

The boys showed up every Monday after school while Uncle Mikey sold liquor in the back room to folks who needed to stock up for the weekend. They often took a break from sweeping and stacking to discuss philosophical matters. Both boys dreamed of traveling to foreign places.

"I want to go to Chicago," said Dirksen.

"Atlanta," said Cal.

If it weren't too busy in the store, Uncle Mikey liked to entertain the boys with stories about his favorite pastime—football.

“When you gonna take me with you to the Death Valley stadium?” Uncle Mikey said you could watch a night game with lights that shone brighter than the sun.

“You’re lucky,” Dirksen told Cal after hearing another one of his stories about a yardstick that could measure the worth of a man. “Wish I knew what I was good at.” As Minister Turner’s son, everyone measured Dirksen against the yardstick of his father, who several years ago, had saved a family near Bayou Macon. It had something to do with a fishing hole.

“Now we even got to watch where we fish,” said his mother, who at the time was busy threading a needle with her long fingers held beneath a single electric bulb in the kitchen. Minister Turner said it was a terrible shame and cautioned Dirksen to stay on his side of the bayou, never to ramble, not to wade across its greenish-blue waters with its attractive spangles of sun.

Dirksen didn’t think too much about his father’s advice. All he knew was that the kids called him “Turnover” at school instead of his last name, which was Turner, and tacked on Blueberry or Strawberry, depending upon the color of what he wore. He was fat, which is why his mother referred to him as “a little chubby.” Anytime he licked a popsicle or stuffed another chocolate bar into his mouth from Uncle Mickey’s Fiesta Party House, he wondered how Cal, with all his peanut butter sandwiches, remained so skinny. One day Dirksen calculated that Cal ate approximately 65 sandwiches a month, which he figured came out to two sandwiches a day, not all that much when he really

thought about it. “How come everything I eat makes me fat and short and everything you eat makes you skinny and tall?”

“Peanut butter,” said Cal, who revealed his secret. “On the first of every month, my auntie gets a box with bread, milk, cheese, and stuff like that. But I like the peanut butter the best. Makes me a sandwich, one for breakfast and one for dinner. Grape jelly, too. Just like those grape popsicles.”

Dirksen felt that his friend, who was a connoisseur of magazine stories, might enjoy more variety in his diet. “You like chicken?”

Cal’s interest was immediately piqued. “Chicken?”

“Come for dinner at our place sometime. No, really,” which is how Cal got to be a regular, joined by other congregants from his father’s church who stopped by after Sunday service. Both of his parents seemed to be pleased that Dirksen had found a new friend. But the kids at school kept calling Dirksen “Blueberry Turnover;” and they called Call “Stucked up,” and if that wasn’t bad enough, the friendlier Cal and Dirksen became, the more the kids laughed.

“Let ‘em talk,” said Cal. “They just stupid. Listen to me; I read this new article. Did you know that the Tirenshia Worm from the rainforest of Brazil grows to a length of one and a half feet?” That sounded more like a snake than a worm to Dirksen. “And did you know that if you rub iron filings on the back of a large-mouthed bass,” he said, “they’ll lead you home?”

“Sure you’re not making that up?”

“It’s the God’s honest truth.” He kissed his two fingers and pressed them to his heart.

Dirksen wanted to outdo Cal, but no matter how hard he thought, he couldn’t match the Tirenshia Worm. On their walks home from school, sometimes Cal would remove a smashed peanut butter and jelly sandwich from inside his back pocket. Chewing and sucking on his tongue, he’d ask, “Did you know if you want to slide a tank over a hill, all you have to do is coat the hill with peanut butter and a bunch of banana peels?”

“You crazy,” Dirksen said. “It would take thousands of jars. And why would anyone do that? All the wheels would get jammed up in that mess.”

“From the Journal of Interdisciplinary Warfare.” Cal crossed his heart and hoped to die.

Dirksen liked listening to Cal’s stories. “I’m glad you moved to Delhi. You my best friend.”

“You mine too.”

Summertime, they sat on Dirksen’s screened porch where they dared the mosquitoes to bite them. Dirksen was thinking about his father’s latest sermon. “He said the Israelites wandered around in the desert for forty years. Did you know that?”

Cal’s pupils opened as wide as a lily pad. This was the first time Dirksen had asked Cal one of those did-you-know questions that he couldn’t answer. Right away Cal wanted to know, “Where did they find water?” He slipped his sandwich back inside a shirt pocket. He always liked to spread out his bites.

“The Bible is a big book. You can’t expect me to memorize the whole thing.” He fanned through the pages of his father’s volume to demonstrate the point.

Cal stood around and mulled over what exactly the Israelites drank in the desert. “Let’s go to the library. We can look it up.”

Dirksen wanted to go to the Fiesta House and ask Uncle Mikey to pump air into his bike tires and maybe he’d give him a Sno-Cone from inside his store with grape syrup dripping over crushed ice. “No,” he said. “I’m busy right now,” which is something his father frequently told him.

“If you want to spend all day sitting on your bubble butt—then suit yourself. I’ll go by myself.”

No way that was going to happen. Dirksen was not going to let Cal find an answer to the single ‘did you know’ question he’d ever asked. It wouldn’t be right. “Okay, Calvin. Quit your squawking. I’ll go with you.”

The library was next to Fiesta Party House, two rooms owned by Uncle Mikey, who sold milk, coffee, sugar, flour, bread, cigarettes, and a tray of fried chicken. He sold liquor in the back. There was also a bathroom that often went without toilet paper to discourage people from using it, and a candy and chewing gum display near the door. They walked past his store and to the library. It wasn’t exactly what you would call a real library. More like a place filled with used books that people had donated or found in the waiting room of the Greyhound Bus Station, plus stacks of old magazines rescued from dental offices, which had been a project of his father’s church to help “uplift minds.” Mrs. Dunn sat

behind an oak desk, an elderly woman whose hands resembled the tines of a rake. A ceiling fan bullied the heat, pushing it around the room. She rolled a sharpened pencil back and forth on the desk and then stopped when she saw them. "You come to look at magazines, Cal?"

"No, ma'am." Dirksen cut in and tried to explain. "You see, Cal and I were talking on my mother's porch the other day and wondered where the Israelites found water to drink in the desert, so we figured we'd come here and find out ourselves."

She banged her fist on the oak desk, which caused Mrs. Dunn's wig to bounce up toward the ceiling and down and land on her scalp. She stared at him hard. "Dirksen Turner, why don't you ask your daddy instead of wasting my precious time?"

"Because," he lied and expected a hole to open up in the ground beneath him, "because my daddy is a Baptist and my grandfather is a Methodist, and I don't want them to fight."

Her eyelids fluttered and she shook her head. "Dirksen, your daddy helped to create this library. He's his own reference book on anything Bible, which is where you need to go, young man, to get your question answered. Ask your daddy. Scram and leave me alone with my crossword puzzle." She picked up her pencil and shooed them away.

But right then, Cal's eyes glittered. "We can go to the library in Baton Rouge. I bet they have lots of magazines."

"You're plumb crazy, Cal. Do you know how far away that is?"

"How far?"

“Far enough.”

Cal and Dirksen retreated into separate corners. For a few weeks they didn't talk to each other. Dirksen paid extra visits to Uncle Mikey's store or sat on his back porch.

“Where's Cal?” asked Uncle Mikey.

“Don't know.” Dirksen lied.

Cal actually spent the next few weekends escorting his auntie to the dental office where there was a single fan. She was happy to sit in the office to have it blow on her. Cal didn't mind because he could read magazines, but after awhile, he got bored with looking at the same magazines. Uncle Mikey finally asked if the two boys wanted to take a ride to the warehouse in Visalia. He needed to stock up on more beer, soda, and water. They said yes and left early in the morning. The moon hung low in the sky like a half-eaten biscuit. When Uncle Mikey rolled down the window, Dirksen smelled something like burning cow manure. The smell came from a local mill that turned pulp into paper. “Roll up the window, boys.” His uncle lit a cigarette to disguise the stink. Once he pulled into the warehouse, they loaded his cab with boxes, but Uncle Mikey left to talk a woman who worked in the front office. “Meet me here in an hour.” He spit in his hand and flattened down a stray hair. Then he gave each of them a dime.

“What that for?” Dirksen asked.

“For helping.”

“Uncle Mikey, can I ask you something?” His uncle’s hands rested on the steering wheel.

“How come you don’t ever come over for Sunday dinner? Everyone else do.”

“It’s a complination,” he said. “You see, Minister Turner don’t like that I sell liquor. But I need to make a living. So we’ve got something here you might call a Mexican stand-off.”

The boys walked around downtown, which was exactly two blocks long, and pressed their noses against the glass windows of a barbershop (closed), a gun shop (also closed), and the Dream Bee House resale shop (open) that had all kinds of bric-a-brac in the window. The lady behind the register looked at them and shook her head. She was on the heavy side, patting sweat on her forehead with a bunched up tissue that she held in one hand. “Hot today.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You boys aren’t from around here, are you?”

Dirksen shook his head and looked at the shelves. There was not one empty space—piles of dishes, cups, old waffle irons, toasters, and framed pictures leaned against the walls.

There were several fans with their cords snaking toward them on the wooden floor.

Dirksen saw a cardboard box with a silver blue number nine sticking out the top. “What’s that?” He touched the number with his outstretched finger.

“Uniforms.”

Dirksen opened it. The uniforms were blue with large white numbers embossed on their backs and gold trim around the neckband, and fabric so soft, it floated. “Football uniforms?” He asked with a reverence that his father might’ve taken for prayer.

Dirksen couldn’t hear enough about football, liked running down a field as fast as he could, feel his feet strike the soft dirt with the wind stinging in his ears, leaping into the air, cradling a ball in his hands with the leather pressed hard against his chest, his hand extended out and dodging anyone who tried to get in his way. He wanted to spring into the end zone and make a touchdown running like a deer finding a patch of berries in winter and put as much distance between himself and his father’s church as he could. In that moment, Dirksen saw his future as clearly as he could see the door to his house.

Mrs. Bee nodded. Veins stood out on her long hands, silver threads fanned out from her temples. “People grow up, move, die, or get run out,” she laughed. “And when they do, I get their stuff. I never know what or who is going to walk through the door. But sooner or later, they all do. Like you two boys. Doesn’t look like much, but the place is a natural history museum. Everything got its own story.

Cal came back with a handful of National Geographics. They were bent into every shape except flat.

“Take them,” said Mrs. Bee. Cal couldn’t believe his good fortune. In appreciation, he pressed his afternoon peanut butter and jelly sandwich into her hand. “That’s all right, boy. Keep your sandwich. You skinny. Look like you need it more than I do.”

They went back to the car. Uncle Mikey wasn't there. Dirksen thought about how he'd look wearing a football uniform and popped open a Coke. Sitting there in the heat, he had the second vision of his day—realized what the Israelites did in the desert to slake their thirst.

He wondered if cactus grew in that desert because Cal had told him that you could cut an arm of cactus with a sharp knife and suck out the water just as long as a person was careful not to get a mouth full of prickly share needles. Or maybe they took turns digging wells through the sand and let babies drink first, because that would be the right thing to do. He wondered if they carried water with them, or if there were desert donkeys with water jugs slung on either side or maybe camels; Cal had told him about camels with two humps where they stored all the water they would need for months. He swished Coke around his mouth and felt the sweet bubbles explode inside awakening him to his new purpose. So maybe there was water in the desert—a person only needed to know how to find it. “Cal?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Remember awhile ago when we were talking about those Israelites?”

“Not now,” he said. “Way too hot.”

*Chapter Four—Like a Railroad Train*

Bryan waited in his Tundra outside the zoo where his daughter, Jenny, a high school senior, volunteered every weekend. He was glad she still showed more interest in the animals at the zoo than boys at her school. Her favorite monkeys were the Capuchin and the Golden Lion Tamarin. Jenny told him that Tamarins were an endangered species with claws for nails, which was different from other primates, including humans. Her taste in birds veered toward the tropical: macaws and cockatoos. Sometimes she'd get Bryan to walk to the animal shelter a few blocks from the zoo.

"He's such a cute pug," she'd implore. "Daddy, please," and look up at him with eyes that made it difficult for him to refuse her anything. Bryan stood his ground. He had enough to do, least of all clean up after a puppy.

After closing time at the zoo, families strolled outside, little girls outfitted in flouncy lime-green skirts sucked on lollipops and rambunctious boys chased soccer balls across the lawn. A small garden grew outside edged in red begonia plants that collapsed in the heat over the pavement. Bryan watched for Jenny to emerge from the employee exit. He sat there blowing cigarette smoke out the car window and listening to Lynyrd Skynyrd playing on the radio. "Hi, honey. How was your day?" Jenny swung her backpack to the floor, sat down and crossed her arms. She shook out her blonde ponytail.

"That's all? Not even a hello?" He started the engine. "Okay. Do-over. How was your day?"

“I wish you wouldn’t ask so many questions.” She reached past him and shut off the radio.

“Hey you! I was listening to that.” Living with a seventeen year-old was a constant source of irritation. One day she’d be doing cartwheels out the door, and the next minute she acted like a snapping turtle. “Is that what I get for asking you a simple question?”

“Quit bugging me. Why don’t you just turn it back on?”

“Young lady, I don’t like your attitude. What’s gotten into you?”

Bryan pulled over. Pine trees stretched before them. Staring out the windshield, she crossed her arms over her national parks T-shirt with a picture of a brown bear. In one of those momentary insights that are infrequently visited upon parents, he realized, “Did an animal die? I’m so sorry, honey. Was it that new baby rhino you were telling me about last week? It’s nature’s way. We’re born and then we die. Some things we just can’t change.”

She shook her head again. “You don’t get it. You’re not listening.”

Bryan didn’t have a clue what was going on. “Dag gummit, help me out then.”

“Not a rhino,” she said, pounding her backpack with her fists. “A boy. A person.” She yanked the scrunchie from her ponytail, shook her hair loose, then pulled it back tight from her scalp, and gathered it this time higher on her head.

Bryan braced himself. He had a bad feeling. “What’s his name?”

“We called him RR. Said it sounded like a railroad train. Said one day he wanted to take a ride across country and see the Pacific Ocean. His real name was Rincon Roberts.”

“So sorry, honey. I’d go crazy if anything like that ever happened to you.” He’d throw himself into one of those super-heated vats at work and dissolve, the same sick feeling he got whenever he thought about his biological parents who had died in a car crash. Memories fogged his head; a mother pushing him out a window. Mountains crumbling into a roar around his feet. A large red eye flashed on and off. Sirens. Crickets danced, the night opened its toothless gums and swallowed him whole. A big man who smelled of cigarettes picked him up and pressed him against a scratchy chest. Frantic sounds of “Is he still alive? Any one else?” Everything cleared to a flat landscape. He swore Jenny would never be bounced around and that she would never have to fend for herself. But it was still there: he felt the heaviness of Rincon’s death in his arms. Bryan watched a peacock jump on top of the hood of an SUV. The driver had gotten out of his cab and was trying to shoo it away. Instead, the peacock chased him. He guffawed.

“What’s so funny?”

“The peacock...Look, Jenny. I brought both the boys to their grandmother’s house.” A heron at the side of Bryan’s truck poked through a field of bleached reeds. Bryan started to pull out.

“Dad!”

“I didn’t know, honey. I didn’t know he was going to die. How could I know?”

“But why didn’t you?” She tugged at the zipper of her backpack and pulled the metal teeth open. Jenny had always believed that Bryan could fix anything: unknot shoelaces, stop bloody noses, broken toilets, and patch up his marriage. “How come you didn’t take him to the hospital right away?”

She kept staring at him. “I did everything I knew how to do. Sometimes that’s the only thing you can do.” Jenny stared at a bunch of squirrels nattering on a tree branch. “Don’t you get it?” He tried to tell her. “I wasn’t kin. His grandma insisted. I asked if I could help, but she drove away. I did everything I knew how. There’s nothing I could’ve done different. That’s it.”

Jenny pounded her backpack and looked out the window. “You could’ve done more!”

“No, baby.” She thought everything was so simple.

“You could’ve called.”

“That wouldn’t have done a lick of good. His family...”

“But how d’you really know?”

“I couldn’t know he was dying, baby. I did the same thing I’d want anyone else to do, if you got sick. I picked him up; put him in the back of my truck, took him to his family.”

Peacocks strutted between the parked cars and SUVs. A few parents held back their young children from chasing them. They could be vicious. “You’d take care of any animal better,” said Jenny. “I know you would.”

“Wow. That’s a low blow.”

She began to silk the ends of her hair. “I used to feed the birds with Rincon. He was my only friend.”

“What about your friends in school?” It was rare for anyone from school to visit the house. On some days it worried him terribly; on others, he was glad she didn’t have the same distractions that had fouled his way.

“The girls go shopping and giggle about boys. They’re not like me, Dad.”

“Remember when grandma died?” She nodded. “We went to the cemetery and put flowers on her grave? But she’s not gone. She’s here in our hearts. You can feel her, can’t you?” Bryan lit up a cigarette.

“I thought you were using those patches. You’re killing yourself and you won’t listen.”

Well, if she didn’t drive him nutty, maybe he wouldn’t need to smoke. He flipped the cigarette out the window.

She reached for rest of the pack and tossed it out her side of the car, then opened the glove compartment. “You asked me to put these here. Remember? So they would be handy.”

“I forgot.”

She started to sob. “I hate that you have to work for that stupid company. I wish you could play music and I could go to your concerts like I used to. Sit behind the stage.”

“No, baby.”

“Why can’t you? You always told me you were gonna get rich.”

He blew a wand of smoke out the open window. If he had made the right decisions... By now, he could’ve been retired in some nice beach house property on the Gulf Coast, sitting around like Jimmy Buffet drinking margaritas and wouldn’t have to worry about how he was going to get his daughter through college. He had traded a career in music for a regular job. Once he had a chance to make a shit pot load of money.

“Sonnn,” advised Little Albert, a man with a bad stutter who also had schooled Bryan in the virtue of shoe trees and polishing his boots with baby oil, “you’ve gottt to have the rrrrightttt format. Ssstart ssslow, end big, and make them come backkk for more.” Little Albert considered Bryan his protégé. He’d taught him a few other things, especially after Bryan had been busted for smoking a joint that had been reported all over the newspapers. Authorities wanted to use him as an example. “It don’t matter whatttt people are saying about you, jussst as long as they are talkngggg.” He was right. Just like after Bryan’s performance at the Junior League fundraiser, his phone kept ringing with bookings. Bryan’s adopted mother was not impressed. She visited his apartment late one evening, and told him what she thought about his smoking dope and how he was on a sure road to hell.

Little Albert had taken Bryan into his confidence. “I like you a lottt and I want to helppp you become a rrrrich man.”

Bryan listened to his mentor. The drinking helped to curb Little Albert’s stutter. He drank some more. “Casinos are coming to town. They’re going to put everyone out of business—Free drinks, food and something else. Gambling mmmachines everywhere, even at the side of the road. Right now they are going for bargain basement prices: I can let you buy as many as you want at one thousand dollars a pop. Ten thousand dollars equals a fortune. Think about it. This is a real once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I’m telling you this only because it’s you, Bryan. You’re like a son to me.” Little Albert was a man of few words and this had been one of his longest conversations. Once he finished his drink, he shook Bryan’s hand and left.

The idea of owning gambling machines that would fill his pockets with thousands for the remainder of his life branded his brain with dollar signs. Even so, Bryan wasn’t ready to give Little Albert a yes or no. He decided to ask the one person whom he knew would give him a straight answer.

“Don’t you ever do it,” said his adopted mother, a stout woman who liked to mix her lemonade with a large thimbleful or two of vodka.

“We could make a load of money. Not just me, all of us. Think of it. You could pay off the house. Then take a real vacation; you could go to Hawaii. Even get a facelift.”

They sat in her kitchen in Shreveport. Her house was across the street from an elementary school. It was afternoon. Yellow school buses pulled up to the curb; brakes squealed to a stop. She buttoned him down with a hard look.

“But when a golden goose knocks on the door, isn’t it the Christian thing to invite him inside?”

“Bryan Montgomery.” Whenever she called him by his middle name, he knew she was being deadly serious, “I thought I’d raised you better than that.” He knew she was right. A fear of becoming dependent on the mafia weighed heavily against the dollar signs dancing inside his head. A thumb pressed against his spinal cord, like a police chalk drawing on the sidewalk. Another nightmare.

He asked Little Albert, “Would that keep me locked into playing the casino circuit?”

Little Albert chewed a stick of Black Jack gum. “You betcha. Bookings coming out the wazoo. For the rest of your ever-loving life.”

Bryan looked at Jenny, who sat with her hands folded across her chest. “There are certain things you can’t understand.”

“I hate when adults say that.” She punched her backpack again.

“Jenny, girl. I thought we both agreed that our time together is about getting you through college. Thought you weren’t gonna let anything stop you, not boyfriends, not drugs, not anything.”

“But why did this have to happen?”

He reached across the seat and hugged her across the cup holders. So many times he'd asked himself the same thing.

*Chapter Five—Be Not Afraid*

Jenny insisted on going to the community memorial service for Rincon to support the Roberts family. She'd found out about it from the zoo. The sanctuary was packed, not a difficult thing in a small church, which was located in downtown Hentsbury. Coffee, cookies and water were set out on a table in the hallway, napkins folded into triangles next to a stack of programs, a picture of Rincon on the front cover, a small boy with a big smile. A group gathered in a knot and spoke quietly. The room was painted a shade of surplus green, plastic molding around the windows textured to look like pine knots. Bryan and Jenny found seats toward the back and turned down faded red cushions. The few white faces sitting in the congregation peered at them as though they were all curiosities scattered throughout the church. One woman looked familiar. He couldn't place her. Bryan scanned the seats, spotted Nell sitting in the first row next to a tall dark-skinned man wearing a black suit and striped blue tie.

"It'll be okay." He held Jenny's hand. "Any other friends here from the zoo?" She looked around. Bryan read the memorial program. The Roberts family had asked that all donations be made out in Rincon's name to the Committee for Rincon Roberts in care of the Living Gospel church. *Be Not Afraid* played over the speakers. More people entered, shook hands and gave out hugs. A hush fell over the congregation. As if by some unspoken agreement, everyone sat down at the same moment. The assembled mourners bowed their heads in prayer. There were two large fans stationed at either end of the pulpit. A large spray of orange gladiola and white roses cascaded beneath the pulpit.

Deacon Turner, an imposing man in a flowing black smock, came to the front, three white crosses embroidered at his neckline. “Brothers and sisters. Let us take a moment to pray for unity and understanding.” Everyone waited for him to finish his speech that included an invocation for those who had chosen not to attend the memorial service.

“I’d like to thank everyone for coming today, but I’d also like to say a prayer for those who did not see fit to join us because they were scared or felt that they didn’t need to pay Rincon their respects. Lord, I’d like you to forgive them and also help them to find their way back, even though they may fear for their jobs or company retaliation. We ask for guidance.” The mourners were about to offer another amen, but Deacon Turner didn’t give them a chance. “And heal the hearts of those among us who do not wish to plant the seed of hope in our family, but only know how to cultivate the seeds of discord. Grant them the ability to listen, as we are all Gideon’s children threshing wheat upon the fields.

The congregation saw their chance and belted out a collective Amen.

“And although we may tremble in full view of our enemies who seek to harm us with their influence and money, drowning us with sickness in the heartland of our homes, the Lord is always there by our side. He says, go forth to do our work upon the threshing floor. I am with you. You are my children.”

Amen.

Deacon Turner addressed the community. “Let us begin.” He called to the table in the back. “Is the video running? We want to give the Roberts a copy of the memorial.”

Getting assurances from the balcony, he continued, “We are here today in memory of

nine-year-old Rincon Roberts who was exposed to high levels of hydrogen sulfide near the bridge and was later hospitalized. He died due to a severe asthma attack brought on by exposure to high levels of hydrogen sulfide. It's gotten to the point that we can't expect our children to come home safely. You all know that we've been getting sick here for years. Now our children are dying. How can that be an accident?"

Someone from the audience shouted, "It's not!"

"Thank you, sister. The Roberts family has asked us to use this occasion to bring us together. Nell Roberts is gonna address us. Give her your fullest attention and all your love. Is the video running? Does anyone have a problem with us filming? Show of hands?" None were raised. "Let us begin." The man sitting next to Nell helped her up and kissed her cheek.

Nell pulled the microphone toward her mouth and twisted it away from the stand. She stood next to Deacon Turner. Her voice wavered. "The boys were by the river because they wanted to bring home catfish." She shook her head and took a deep breath. "The doctor at the hospital said what Rincon had died from—an extreme asthma attack brought on by the sulfide gas. But he wouldn't put that on Rin's death certificate. I asked him why? He said sorry, he couldn't. Sorry. Couldn't." Her voice drifted off and she curled the program inside the palm of her hand. "Rincon was a sweet boy who loved fishing and riding his bicycle. Summer is when boys ride their bicycles. My grandson died doing what most boys do. It don't make sense." She slipped the microphone back in its stand.

Her husband Cal took the microphone, his eyes dragged down by dark circles. “Our family doesn’t need you to feel sorry...this is a time for doing.” He collected himself and began again. “Nell lost her job because the company says she’s used too much sick time. But you know that’s not the reason. Everyone sitting here today knows she’s been trying to do something about these poisons.” The man took Nell’s hand and helped her back to her seat followed by an echo of “That’s right, he’s right.”

The principal of Rincon’s school stood up and told the Roberts family how kids in the area were always getting sick. “There are more nosebleeds in schools here than there are tissues to wipe them.” Rincon’s teacher handed the Roberts family a sequined shoebox that was filled with cards and pictures drawn by Rincon’s classmates.

A woman with braids and several rings on her fingers stood up. “We’ve replaced our air conditioning unit three times in the last five years. They say the copper keeps getting eaten away by chemicals.”

“Raymond Shields,” an older white man, emerged upright from the wooden bench with some difficulty. He introduced himself while holding on to the row in front of him. “I worked inside the mill until I was seventy. My great-granddaddy was one of the founders of Hentsbury. He never planned on the mill making people sick. He bought up yellow pine around here and put it to work.” His feet buckled. He fell to his seat with a thud. Everyone turned around. “It’s all right. I’ve got him; I’ve got him,” said the woman sitting next to him. “His medication gives him the shakes.” Someone passed a plastic bottle of water up through the aisle.

“What about our jobs, Deacon?” Everyone looked toward the back to locate the owner of the voice.

“Willie Anderson.” He had salt and pepper hair and worked at Rand-Atlantic’s wood yard. Bryan had heard that the man had passed out in his vehicle. “All this talk is fine. But more than anything, we need to work. Who’s going to pay my bills if I’m not working? I’m not saying no, but I’m not saying yes, either. What are we going to do if we get fired? You know how Rand acts when we get sick. They have their own doctors signing papers saying we’re healthy and good to go. Who’s to say they won’t fire us all if we start talking about pollution and restitution?”

Another man spoke from his seat. “Not any one of those doctors ever helped me out.”

Willie said, “Easy for you to say, Vince, but you retired last year. You’re not gonna lose your job.”

Cal got up. “I think we should form a committee. I’ve been reading in medical journals. We’ve got a high cancer rate here. Statistics say that if you’re looking for a place to buy a home, stay away! The company wants us to believe this is a great place; they say we owe them everything including our children’s lives. Right?” He squeezed Nell’s hand. “But Rand-Atlantic didn’t build the mill. The Shields did. They cared about health and safety. Now my uncle carries around an oxygen tank wherever he goes. Like Miss Corinne sitting back there.”

“Maybe we can collect money. Take out an ad,” said the woman who was sitting next to the older man who had collapsed.

The Deacon thanked Brother Cal, and told Sister Kim not to forget her newspaper idea. Willie shrugged and shook his head. "I'm not going to join no committee. Don't make any sense at all." There was a small commotion of 'He's right' and shushes. Women sat like sphinxes and fanned themselves.

"Now settle down. If you are in favor of forming a committee, please raise your hand." Arms went up wearing watches, bracelets, rings, holding phones and water bottles. "The family wants to call it the Committee for Rincon Roberts. They ask that you send your donations on behalf of Rincon to help with this work. Tell your friends and your family. Tell your neighbors. All those in favor, say Aye." But before the memorial service dispersed, a white lady took the microphone.

Bryan thought she looked familiar, dag gummit, that little screechy woman from the bridge; she was popping up everywhere. Said her name was Lila Shawn. "I'm a member of the River Watchers. We've been talking about the same things. The Ouachita is being polluted by run-off from the mill where I live in Louisiana. We've been working with scientists back in Little Rock. EPA's is supposed be coming out here soon. My phone number is on the flyer."

He looked up at the ceiling and watched a flying blot circling past the wooden beams of the church and above its fluorescent fixtures where it expanded and contracted into a clenched fist and then zoomed toward Bryan, slapping him in the center of his forehead, dripping down the side of his face like an egg yolk. Just what he needed, to be around a River Watcher crazy who could easily cost him his job. "Why me Lord? Why now?" He

looked for the exit and told Jenny to follow him outside. It was the last thing he wanted to find himself in the middle of this. He was sorry about what had happened, sorry that the emergency room had been so busy and that Rincon had to wait to see the doctor. But things like that happen, sometimes events can roll over and flatten you. An avalanche. He saw people with red River Watcher buttons pinned to their jackets. He removed his own jacket with its Rand-Atlantic logo stitched over the pocket and draped it over his arm. He had only come because of Jenny.

“Shhh, Daddy. Quiet.” They walked to the back of the church, approached a full-sized photograph of Rincon standing at the entrance to the zoo with several other staff members and pointing at the entrance. Jenny whispered a few words. “I remember that picture. A raccoon had gotten loose in the shed. We’d just finished chasing it away from the bird aviary.” Bryan remembered Rincon’s chest convulsing.

Nell and Cal Roberts stood at the door near the parking lot exchanging hugs and receiving a steady benediction of ‘God bless you,’ nodding their heads and shaking hands. Carson stood at his grandmother’s side, loosening his collar.

“Cal,” Nell took Bryan’s hand, “here’s the man I was telling you about who brought Rincon and Carson home.”

“Mr. Thurmond, thanks so much for your help.”

For a moment, Bryan looked at the space between his two feet. “You’re welcome, but I don’t feel like I did much of anything.” He introduced his Jenny to them and told Carson, “She used to work with Rincon at the zoo.”

The boy became animated. “Rincon told me about a parrot. A talking parrot. Him for real?”

“You should see what happens whenever the parrot asks, ‘Where’s the bathroom?’ Visitors aren’t too sure if they should point to the men’s or ladies’ room.” They shared a laugh and then they were silent.

Bryan spotted Lila Shawn walking over to the Roberts family. He tugged at Jenny’s hand, but he hadn’t been quick enough.

“Dad, what’s wrong with you? Stop pulling on me.”

“Mr. Thurmond, good to see you.”

“Good to see you, too.” Bryan told Jenny it was time to leave for her hair appointment.

“C’mon, we’ve got to go.”

“But it’s for tomorrow afternoon.”

“No, today. Don’t you remember? The salon left a message on the phone.”

“You never told me.”

“I rescheduled.” He looked at her so she wouldn’t have any shred of a doubt.

*Chapter Six—Deacon (Dirksen) Turner, the Younger*

After Cal's Aunt Theresa had died, it seemed as though there had been more wrong with her than her teeth. "At least she was buried with a full set," said Turner's mom. "It's just as well. That dentist isn't seeing no more black patients. I hear how someone paid his office a visit."

Cal moved in with a family member in Arkansas. Before leaving, he stopped by the house and handed Dirksen a box and gave him a single commandment.

"You gotta read these."

"Why you so bossy?"

Cal climbed into a Rambler with his next of kin. "I saved them for you." The car evaporated into the distance. Dirksen suddenly felt very alone and very small. He brought the box inside and shoved it beneath his bed. Soon he began missing Cal. He missed his talks. He missed the smell of his peanut butter sandwiches. He walked around his room with his hands in his pockets. He looked at the photograph of Grambling University's football team that he'd clipped from the newspaper. He'd wanted to share it with Cal, tell him about Eddie Robinson, the greatest football coach who ever lived from the state of Louisiana. Even Uncle Mikey said so. That's right! Did you know that, Cal? Did you? Now he was gone. Who else was he going to tell? Dirksen opened and closed the window, walked around to the back patio to where he and Cal used to talk. One of his father's bibles rested on the table. He hurled it against the siding and watched the book fall to the ground, land on its spine and flutter open. Dirksen picked up the book and

placed it back on the table. "There. Are you happy?" But before he could turn away, a shaft of sunlight flickered on the cover. "No!" He shook his head. "You can't make me if I don't want to."

"Hey Blueberry Turnover," the kids at school called out on his way home. "Read any good books lately?" He was so tired of their taunts, he went to school by himself, and when he returned home he sat on his parents' porch and watched the squirrels in his yard bury acorns. Dirksen needed a friend, which is when he decided to bring Cal back into his life by doing the one thing he knew how to do. Dirksen went on a peanut butter diet. The smell reminded him of Cal and made him feel better. He ate a peanut butter sandwich for breakfast and one in the afternoon, fried catfish and greens that his mother served in the evening, washed down with one of Uncle Mikey's sodas. He figured that if he did that long enough...well, he didn't know exactly.

"Is that all?" his mother asked, holding out a plate of buttered hot biscuits. "Not even macaroni salad? You always used to love macaroni salad. C'mon, Dirksen. At least take another biscuit." She held out a platter and smiled. "Pie?"

He stood his ground. "No thank you, ma'am."

She exchanged worried looks with Minister Turner and shook her head.

"Anything wrong with you, boy?"

That school year, he lost forty pounds on the peanut butter sandwich diet, and it seemed like all the weight he'd lost went straight into his height. He towered over everyone, able

to intercept any football that was thrown in his direction, although admittedly, there were few passes. His mother said, “Dirksen, let me know if you plan to get taller, because if you do, we might have to put on a new roof. Guess you take after your father’s side. They’re all over six feet.”

The football coach, Trevor Arnold’s stepdad who worked at the paper mill, asked him to try out for the team. Mr. Arnold said the school needed a team like any other school, black or white; it made no difference. Dirksen practiced in their backyard, ran back and forth from the red gum to the oak tree and held a rusted watering can for a football.

“I’ll say one thing,” said his mother while watching him in the backyard. “You sure do run fast.”

Trevor’s dad managed to round up a bunch of old uniforms. He asked everyone in town to look around their basements in case there was something they could use. None of the uniforms fit well. The numbers on their jerseys peeled off on the field and had to be picked up after practice. It got so bad, coach invented a new position called, “Ironer.”

“Turner. Come here quick.”

He assigned Turner to the Ironer spot, which meant that in addition to his regular position, he brought home whatever uniform needed to be repaired to his mother. She had a stack of iron-on patches. Every so often he’d watch the white kids drive by in a yellow bus that took them to play football in different parishes. They practiced on a real lawn that was redolent with green grass mowed to a single height, not like the field where his team played, a stretch of land near the town dump that was filled with ruts. The white

kids' field was on the other side of Bayou Macon. Even though his father had warned him countless times about not going there, Dirksen planned an exploratory visit to see what a real football team looked like. He had to, especially if he was ever going to meet Eddie Robinson from Grambling State University.

He found the narrowest section of bayou, carefully stepped across stones, and made his way through a grove of southern oaks that marked the boundary of the school on the other side. Then he saw them. The numbers on those white kids' jerseys didn't flap off their backs and they didn't have to share helmets or roll up their pants.

A man caught him spying. "Hey, boy. Why you standing around?" The man wore an LSU cap pulled low over his eyes. A ring of fat hung over his belt. He held something that looked like a car jack.

"I play for Edison."

"Is that so? I hear you boys wear rags."

"They're not rags, sir. They're our uniforms." The man's fist curled into a stump.

Dirksen watched the man rhythmically beat the ground with the iron. Prickles rose on the back of his neck. "Hey, boy. You contradicting me?"

"No, sir." A group of young white boys entered from the other side of the field.

"There's one of them niggers who thinks he can play football."

Dirksen heard an ugly snicker. At the same time, a hot wind brushed against his forehead.

The man waved for the boys to go away. They slowly walked behind the trees. He lifted the car jack over his head and hit the ground with a thud and came toward him.

Dirksen ran as if he were setting a new Olympic track record. His eyes scouted a path across the rocks. He didn't bother to look over his shoulder until he got home, where he found his father sitting at the kitchen table holding a mug of coffee. He was panting, sweat dripping from his forehead.

“Where you been, boy?”

He caught his breath. “Sir, that man was not right about what he said.”

“What man? What you talking about?”

Dirksen told him.

“I'll tell you what's not right. Do you know what could've happened? Some things are as right as they're ever gonna get. How many times have I told you? It's not safe for you to go across that bayou.”

“What about everyone being equal in the sight of God?”

“Don't you get it, son? That doesn't have a hairball in hell to do with football. Not one bit.”

His daddy had never talked to him like that. He never cursed. Ever. “What then?”

“On Judgment Day we all will be equal in the sight of the Lord.” Minister Turner bowed his head over his mug. Heat from the coffee steamed his glasses.

“I don’t want to wait that long.” He’d been reading Cal’s magazines. They talked about something called the civil rights movement. He’d heard that his father was planning to a special sermon on just that topic and was going to take up a special collection for some church in Alabama, which was the first time Dirksen had willingly agreed to go to services.

“You’ll get yourself into a mess of trouble,” he said. “Trust me. I know about these things.” It was bad enough for Dirksen to grow up fat and to be a minister’s son, but in addition, he was a black boy in Louisiana where he couldn’t even watch football.

Trust him to do what?

In the evening through his bedroom door, Dirksen heard his mother and father arguing.

“How could you let Dirksen go across the bayou?”

“I had nothing to do with it.”

“Don’t want my son getting killed.”

“Wished he would’ve taken an interest in the ministry. But looks like the Lord has created another path for him.”

“Sometimes I think we should’ve had more children.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean, Zachariah, just in case something happens to the one child we both got.”

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Dirksen talked to the other kids on the team. "Do you want new uniforms?"

"Don't be stupid, Blueberry Turnover. Sure, we do. But how are we going to get them? Think the sky will open up if we get down on our knees and pray hard enough?" They laughed again.

"I have an idea. No, really. Listen."

He kept asking Uncle Mikey about when he planned to make his next trip to the warehouse. He wasn't driving there as much because now he was living with the lady in the tight jeans and red top. She had become his Aunt Mildred and fried all of Uncle Mikey's chicken that he sold in his store.

The kids dropped off their jerseys at Uncle Mikey's place, a sorry collection of rips and tears that wouldn't last through another season. Dirksen asked the team to hand in their stuff clean. No stinky uniforms allowed. They put everything in the back of Uncle Mikey's truck. Weeks before, he'd written Mrs. Dream Bee a letter and managed to get a stamp from his mother when he told her he was sending a letter to Cal.

"I always liked Cal, even though he was a little different. I never met a child who was interested in so many things. My goodness," she whistled to herself, "he always had something going on."

Dear Mrs. Dream Bee:

My friend, Cal, bought, well, he didn't really buy, all your moldy magazines.

Do you still have that box of uniforms?

Yours very truly,

Dirksen Turner

In a few weeks, she sent him back a post card with one word. "Yes."

"So what you gonna do with all this junk you got in the back of my cab?"

"Need to get it to Mrs. Bee."

"Who's Mrs. Bee? Hope you're not getting cemented."

Dirksen knew that his uncle meant to say demented.

"Maybe for once in my life, I should listen to your daddy. First hanging out with that Cal-boy chattering about one crazy thing or another eating your brain up with nonsense. Do you think I'm some junk man? I'm a business man," he said. His hands rested on the steering wheel of his pickup truck, a '55 Ford that he had bought after he had taken over the Fiesta Party House from its previous owners. "Some of us have to work hard for a living."

"Please, sir."

His uncle got out a cigarette and tapped the filter on his thumbnail and lit up. He blew a wand of smoke toward the dashboard. "Dirksen, you better tell me right now what's going on.

"I'm trying to get us real uniforms so the white kids won't laugh at us. We got a real good team, Uncle Mikey. You've seen us play. We got the best team in the parish black or white, better than Granger. All we get to show for being winners is a free box of candy from your store for the entire team." One of Uncle Mikey's eyebrows shot up. "I don't mean anything bad by it. It's just that we parish champions."

"So what you fixing to do?"

"I want to trade-in our old uniforms for newer ones. Mrs. Bee has a box inside her store. Last time we was there I saw them. She says she still got 'em."

"And how do you figure to pay?"

"She trades stuff."

"You don't say so." He blew another wand of smoke before starting up the Ford.

It was toward the end of summer. Dirksen was sweating, the green leather seat stuck to the back of his legs. They pulled up in front of her store. Anytime he saw movement—a bird balance on a telephone wire or squirrel run down a tree, leaves rustling in the tree like a girl putting on a party dress for a church social—he turned his head. Finally, he saw Mrs. Bee toting behind herself what looked like a milk carton on wheels, which was heaped with stuff. She wore a large flowing shirt, orange and green with palm trees, and

wheeled her milk carton to the finish line. She took out a key. "That's her, Uncle Mikey! That's her!"

Uncle Mikey was about to finish his last two or three swigs of beer. "Well, don't just sit there." He threw the cigarette to the ground and crushed it with his heel.

"Nice to see you, Mike."

"Ethel," he said, shaking her hand.

"You two know each other?"

"Been coming to this store long before you were born, Dirksen, and it's one of your Aunt Millie's favorite spots. She collects mugs from casinos, up and down the Mississippi."

Dirksen held out a box as an offering. Mrs. Bee cleaned her glasses with the same tissue she used to wipe her forehead. "What you got there, boy? Something good I hope. A box of chocolate?" She laughed.

"Dirksen's helping his football team get new football uniforms."

"Is that so?" Dirksen watched Mrs. Bee remove each uniform, unfold it on her lap, examine a jersey carefully and then shake her head. She did this slowly, methodically, then tossed each uniform over on the counter. Dirksen weighed what each one of her movements was worth in terms of his future, wondered if he and Uncle Mikey were going to return home empty handed. Then there'd be no end to the teasing. He'd be Blueberry Turnover forever.

She sniffed beneath the armpit of one last uniform. “Don’t know who’s going want these, but I guess they’re clean enough.” She winked at Uncle Mikey. “You never know who’s going walk in through the door.”

“You’ll take them?” asked Dirksen. “Really? We can have the uniforms?”

“Right there in a box behind the door.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Thank you very much.”

Uncle Mikey put the box on his back seat. On the way home, he talked about a sixty-yard pass in Baton Rouge’s Death Valley football stadium by the LSU team. He went on and on about it.

“Uncle Mikey, you really see that pass?” Dirksen checked the back seat to make sure that the box of uniforms hadn’t disappeared.

“On TV I sure did.”

“Would’ve been something to see that ball. Ever been to a real game, Uncle Mikey?”

“I will. One of these days.” He dropped off Dirksen in front of his house.

All evening he hung his head over the bed to check to see if the box were still there.

When the morning light finally filtered through the Venetian blinds, Dirksen grabbed the uniforms and figured he could store the box in his locker at school.

“Dirksen took our old ones back to the bee house,” the boys shouted. “Buzz! Buzz!” They ran around stinging each other. Dirksen got buzzed several more times. “Let’s hear it for, Dirksen Turner!”

The players tried on the new uniforms. “But they got holes all over ‘em,” said one boy, and shot Dirksen an accusing look. “Dirksen these uniforms got holes all over. They ain’t no better than our old ones. What you fooling us for?” They boys gathered around him in a tight knot. “Yeah, Blueberry Turnover!”

Dirksen felt a sinking inside his stomach. “Those are little air holes,” he said. “So we don’t get hot running. Built-in air conditioning. Not any real holes.”

There was a unified cry of “Oh, air holes.” They laughed. “Air holes!” The boys gathered around a mirror and patted Dirksen on the back. “Coach gonna be so proud. Let’s show him. You go first.” Dirksen said a silent prayer and thanked the Lord for not reducing him into a puddle spread out on the floor. When he got home, his mother admired his number 80, and invited the Edison players over for Sunday dinner the following week.

From across the table, his father smiled. “I’m proud of you, son,” and gave him a gift. “Open it.”

“Go ahead. It’s not gonna bite,” said his mother.

Dirksen lifted the lid. He took out a leather book with the letters, “Holy Bible,” embossed in gold on the front cover. The first several pages were marbled in green. There was an

inscription from his father, “To my son, Dirksen Turner. For helping out his team.

Always keep the Lord close to your heart.”

“Thank you, sir. I will.”

And no one ever called Dirksen Turner, Blueberry Turnover ever again.

*Chapter Seven—The Team*

Vernon's boss, Tray Perlson, didn't care for last minute news and he didn't suffer surprises. He always booked reservations for Mardi Gras at least two years in advance. Now Perlson realized that there was a situation five hundred miles from the company's corporate base in Atlanta, Georgia and he'd called in to let Vernon know exactly how he felt about it.

"Thurmond?" Vernon had in turn called Bryan. "My office at ten for a conference call with Atlanta." Vernon didn't usually involve him in such calls. What was up? He walked to Vernon's office on the opposite side of the building and arrived ten minutes early. Bryan tapped on the door. "Come in."

"Yes, sir."

Unlike most offices on the third floor, Vernon's had a window that looked out on pine trees and not the parking lot. On one side of the wall was a calendar page of a woman standing on a pier, on his desk, a framed picture of his daughter, Noreen. The stem of Vernon's glasses hung from a corner of his mouth. Clouds gathered in bunches along the top of his window frame.

"Gonna be wet this afternoon," said Bryan, running the fingers of his left hand over his forehead. "Hope this storm cools things down."

"Damn air conditioning. You gotta fan going in your office?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Do me a favor. Buy me a fan this afternoon. Charge to the account.” Vernon stared out the window and then at his phone. He drummed his fingers on his metal desk and looked up at a white wall clock that marked each second with an annoying tick. The phone rang. Vernon lowered a stubby finger and pushed the speaker button.

“What’s all this shit you faxed over to me?”

“Good morning to you too sir,” said Vernon.

“Sorry, Wolfe. How are you doing on this fine Tuesday morning?”

“Clear to partly cloudy, sir. My lead officer is here with me, Bryan Thurmond.

“Morning, sir,” said Bryan.

“What does Dwayne say?” Dwayne McCullor was the head of the Safety division.

“Dwayne says it’s not his problem. That’s all I hear.”

“Did you ask Safety to make sure that the pipe system isn’t clogged?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And what did those jerk-offs say?”

“Negative.”

“Why am I not surprised? Who’s your Lead Environmental Officer over there?”

“Thurmond.” Vernon pantomimed cleaning out a clot of wax from his ear, shook his head. “All week he’s been waving readings in my face. Says the crew at the ponds is getting dosed up on hydrogen sulfide. If I hadn’t faxed those readings, he would’ve fed me to the hogs. Says the infirmary is working overtime.” Vernon nudged Bryan with the point of his elbow to say something.

“We’ve been logging readings at different times of the day and in different weather conditions. The readings are high, sir.”

“You new to the company, Thurmond?”

“New to the position.”

“I hear you’re a smart cookie. Okay, Wolfe. Tell you what. Set up a meeting for this Thursday. I’ll send someone over Chad Sweeney. He’s a smart guy, knows what he’s doing. Whatever Chad says, goes for me also. You can count on that.” Vernon thanked him. “Keep this under wraps. Those River Watcher idiots would love to get their mitts all over this.”

“They’re releasing information. I’m not sure, but...”

“Better do something, Wolfe. I mean right now.” He hung up with a loud click.

Vernon raked his fingers through his hair. “What’s it gonna take for those River Watchers to understand that jobs are more important than the occasional hydrogen sulfide emission? You think that Dwayne would be out there doing something. Hell no. Wish I could dump him out on the other side of the Rio Grande.”

“Dwayne’s a piece of work, that’s for sure,” said Bryan.

“Never trusted him an inch.” Vernon extended his index finger to show exactly how much, fumed and fretted under his breath about Dwayne McCullor and rammed two sticks of Nicotine gum into his mouth. “Never can look you straight in the eyeballs. Should’ve known the moment I met him, but I was just a kid.”

“Didn’t know you two went far that back.”

“Wish we didn’t.” History could keep or kill you. Vernon explained how Dwayne had worked in supplies ordering solvents and defoamers, hazardous chemicals with long names. “Almost got me fired. One day we were in the break room and he asked me about my weekend. I told him how a buddy of mine from my truck-driving days had offered me some reds. There no way I’d take any. I was stupid to tell him anything. But why would Dwayne blab to some girl he was dating in HR? Especially when he knew that the company was on the lookout for anyone who was noncompliant, especially in connection with their no-tolerance drug policy? Can you beat that? Personnel sent me a warning. I told them, ‘May the Lord keep one hand on my shoulder and the other one on my mouth. You know how us young dudes are. We like to brag.’ Later on, I asked Dwayne, ‘What the hell were you thinking, man?’ And d’you know what that motherfucker said? Told me it was all a joke. Can you imagine? A joke! A stupid joke that could’ve cost me my job.”

Vernon sucked the stem of his glasses. "In two days Atlanta is coming here to get with the environmental team about the sulfide readings. I want you to pull everyone together for Thursday, 8:00 a.m. sharp in the conference room. No exceptions. Got it?"

"And Potter?" That was Bryan's nickname for Mark, who had been the first one to call the situation to Bryan's attention. This was not going to be a smooth pass up the middle, but he was going to give it his best shot. "Mark registered the first round of readings."

Vernon clenched his fist like he was crumbling Mark's head into a bowl of soup. "He's a druggie. An addict."

"He's the first one there in the morning, and the last to leave at night. If he was using, I'd know."

"Warned him to keep away from Noreen."

"Lots of guys on the crew have been arrested on possession. Barely can count anyone who hasn't."

"Not you."

Bryan carried around two lists in his head—the good stuff and the bad stuff and was trying to put more into one shopping cart than the other so when he came time to check-out with the Big Guy in the sky, there'd be no question. He had had been arrested several times. No actual felonies. Just the kind of stupid stuff a guy does when he's young, but only wanted Vernon to know what he wanted him to know. He liked keeping it simple.

"How's Noreen? Still at home with the baby?"

Vernon didn't respond. Instead, he studied his manicure. "If we need to make a case...Okay. Got it. Tell Mark to haul his ass."

Thursday morning Bryan packed his lunchbox and filled a thermos with strong coffee, not the weak brew served up in the break room, slammed together a bologna and cheese sandwich, and zipped up his gear inside a backpack. He approached through the security gate. An orange plume radiated over the plant. Dozens of cars followed him through a cyclone fence. He waved his ID at the security reader, the entry point for round-the-clock shifts that nursed the blackened smokestacks. Inside the plant, cauldrons of wood pulp simmered at three hundred fifty degrees fed with black liquor and quicklime and chlorine gas breaking down the lignin that held all the plant fibers together. He felt the vibration through the floor, a thrumming that moved through his steel-toed shoes into his stomach and made it do flip-flops. The smell made his eyes water. He thought about the wasps from inside his shed and how they made paper from dead wood—people still hadn't figured out how to do that.

Men piled into the team room. They were on time, members of the environmental and safety crews with the same headache and cough that had been dogging Bryan for the last several days, big men with large chests and arms festooned with tattoos from their twenties before they had to pay for child support or take care of families. Everyone wore standard issue blue Rand-Atlantic work shirts with two loblolly pines embossed over the right shirt pocket in a cross. They sipped coffee. There were no windows. Dwayne slipped inside. He wore dark aviator glasses and a thick gold chain. His eyes were a colorless gray sizzle; blackheads lined the side of his nostrils. Dwayne removed his

glasses and sat next to Mark who smelled of fish. For the last several days, Bryan had assigned Mark to the fish burial detail. Dwayne looked around for another seat. There were none. He moved his chair as far back as he could.

Vernon introduced everyone to Mr. Chad Sweeney from the Atlanta office. Bryan led off a polite round of applause that Vernon acknowledged with a nod. Sweeney had been transferred from the West Coast, a man whose brown hair was combed sideways to disguise a large mole sitting on the top of his head like a turkey's egg. He smiled to reveal a cluster of front teeth that were piled inside his mouth. Every so often, he had to redirect his tongue that whipped out from the side of his mouth to avoid the logjam.

"I hear you're having some kind of problem." His voice was thick and gravely.

"Something unaccounted for must be going on inside the mill. Maybe it's at the plywood division, but no one's talking. We're getting high hydrogen sulfide readings," said Vernon.

"Isn't that a presumption on your part?"

Men were sick and fish were floating on top of the water. A presumption? "I don't think so, sir," Bryan said, trying not to sound like he was pissed off with the asshole. He'd seen guys like Sweeney before—men who thought that their shit didn't stink.

"When did this start?"

"Last week," Mark chimed in. "I handed in the first set of readings and they were off the charts."

“I see,” said Sweeney. “Could be your equipment.”

Bryan wondered what the heck he was talking about. “Sir?”

“Your equipment,” he repeated again. Mark gave Bryan a quick look from across the table. “Probably not calibrated correctly.” Sweeney repeated the word more slowly, this time in a tone of voice that sounded like something he reserved for half-wits and Arkansas assholes who spent most of their time goofing off, while he, Chad Sweeney, had earned a master’s degree in environmental science and was an educated man. Bryan could spot his type a mile away. “Cali-brated. Ever consider that?”

Bryan knew that his sensors were not top-of-the-line, but his crew had gone out in the field over and over again to get the best possible averages. Everything was about documentation, which is how the game was played. No numbers, no nothing.

“Our team has a bunch of portable Sensorcons and we’ve been getting the same readings,” volunteered Dwayne, who had pushed his coffee cup to the side and came closer to the table. “Since I’ve been here, we’ve had other similar situations, but I think this one...”

“...this one is off the charts,” said Bryan. “You’re welcome to come to the ponds with any one of us and check it out for yourself. I can take you there after we finish this meeting. Just say the word and we can go now.” He knew that Dwayne angling for a gold medal, but he certainly wasn’t gonna pin it on his chest. Vernon wiped his glasses with a green cloth. Bryan had a hunch that he and Vernon were thinking the same thing. Where had Dwayne gotten authorization to buy calibrated meters that cost thousands of dollars?

Sensorcons? They were state-of-the-art. High-tech stuff. “You know, Mr. Sweeney,” said Bryan. “We’re not as stupid as you might think. Both Safety and Environmental have been comparing notes for the last two weeks,” well, that wasn’t completely true, “and that’s why we’re sitting here now.” In the meantime, Vernon’s eyes drilled into Dwayne’s, letting him know that they had everything under control and to keep his big trap shut. Bryan was glad that Vernon was trying to get this Sweeney character from Atlanta to do something.

“What do you recommend?” Chad combed several strands of hair over his mole with his finger.

For weeks now, they’d been faxing reports. The asshole had flown four hours to give his recommendation and now he wanted them to tell him what to do. Why didn’t he get it? People were getting sick. Was this the best that Tray Perlson, corporate head of the environmental division of Rand-Atlantic, could do? Chad Idiot Sweeney?

Vernon said, “Maybe consider a mill shut-down to flush out the system.” The guys around the table nodded in agreement.

Sweeney pondered the fluorescent light fixture that served as a mausoleum for dead insects. “It’ll cost thousands to close down operations, but I’ll see what I can do. I’ll talk to Tray,” he offered with an air of aristocratic familiarity, generous in his magnanimity. He got up from his chair and glanced at his seat as though it had been holding him hostage for the past twenty-five minutes. Everyone looked at each other, shrugged, and began to pull out their chairs.

Vernon asked, "Is that it?" Bryan thought the exact same thing. Why did even bother to show up? All Bryan knew was that his crew were getting sick, but as far as the company's liability, that was Vernon's concern and he was welcome to it.

"I said I'll speak to Tray." He zipped up his computer inside its case. The meeting was over. Chad was the first one out. Everyone returned to work. Bryan held the door open. He said, "Take it easy out there, guys, and don't forget to wear your respirators," a mask that didn't do much, but was all that they had. "I'll look into making reassignments." Several men, especially the ones who'd been heaving their guts, gave him the thumbs up. Bryan caught Dwayne on the way out. "Thanks for your support, man."

Dwayne nodded. "No problem. We're a team."

Like he really believed that—sure they were a team. Since Bryan had taken the lead position, Dwayne had successfully lobbied management to split their two groups—Environmental and Safety—and made some bullshit case for a reorganization. "Right. Do you think you could lend us those Sensorcons?" If Dwayne said yes, Bryan didn't plan to return them anytime soon. Sensorcons allowed a man to measure an emission from a safe distance, not like his portable detectors.

"Sure thing." He shook Bryan's hand. "No problem. Just stop by my office." He carried his gut back to the hiding place that he called his office.

Mark intercepted Vernon; Bryan approached the huddle from a few yards off.

"What is it, Goshen?"

“I appreciate your inviting me to the meeting.” Mark stood in front of him with a hopeful smile, his sandy hair clipped short like he was still in the military.

“I had nothing to do with it.”

“Bryan said you did. Anyhow, I wanted to thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Vernon was heading for the stairwell, but stopped and turned around.

“How’s the baby?”

“The doctor says if he keeps gaining weight, he’ll be a linebacker.”

Vernon liked the sound of that. “And Noreen?”

Bryan took this as a sign that the freeze between them was beginning to thaw. Mark told Vernon she was doing just fine.

“You tell her I said hi.”

“Will do, sir.”

“Goshen, one more thing. Ask her when I can come by and see the baby.”

*Chapter Eight—Dream Time*

Bryan had a recurring dream about a highway accident. It happened as he drove to pick up Jenny from her volunteer gig at the zoo. He passed a pizza shack advertising a Sweep the Swamp special and became aware of a truck careening down the highway, a cargo of pine trees stacked in the back like toothpicks. The truck was speeding in the left lane. Bryan expected the truck to pass. But somehow the gate of the truck bed rattled open. Pine trees spilled across the divider crushing Bryan's Tundra and hitting him like a giant baseball bat across the highway into a ditch. After lying there for what seemed like an eternity, an egret flew on his hood and tapped his windshield. Tttt. Tttt. Tttt. But the egret had his friend Jay's face with scratchy feathers and black eyes. He tried to wave for help but realized he didn't have arms. He woke up in his West Monroe ranch house, stumbled into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. He was still the same man in his late forties with two arms and most of his hair.

He brushed his teeth and put up a pot of coffee...that dream never left him. Maybe it was because of all those years he'd spent traveling on a bus with a big rig grinding in his ears. Sure, it had been exciting, but after the first ten years of playing honky-tonks throughout the country the glitter began to wear off. He was tired of corralling Jay, and then making calls to set up the next gig, sleeping close to the whir of a motor, while at home Gail sailed into her own oblivion, doing time for passing bad checks and stealing credit cards.

"Man, you know why you keep having that dream?" said Jay who knew him better than most people.

“If you’re so smart, tell me.”

“You’re the Big Guy with the brains,” he said. “Not me.”

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Morning leaked into another day. Time to report to Vernon. “There are fifteen of them, sir, in front of the plant gate standing across the street near McDonald’s. With picket signs and they’re giving out flyers.” He handed Vernon an extra flyer he’d picked up. It showed a picture of a man on his back, and above him the words: Hydrogen Sulfide Poisoning. Don’t Let This Happen to You. Learn More.

Vernon shook his head and glanced at the bottom of the flyer. “Sponsored by those River Rats. I wish they’d float away in a leaky boat and drown.” He held his nose and sank beneath his desk and then resurfaced.

“Do you recognize them?”

“That woman’s name is Lila...Lila Shawn.” Bryan remembered her from their meeting on the bridge and from Rincon’s funeral—short, curly hair, and obstinate. “And there are other people carrying signs, about fifty. They want people from the plant to come to a press conference.”

“Do I look like I’m stupid, Thurmond?”

“No, sir.” Bryan stopped for a moment to catch his breath. He had a cough that had been dogging him for weeks and remembered what that Shawn woman had said about the Mud

River being toxic. “Some of them are carrying oxygen tanks. There was a girl in a wheel chair.”

“Sounds like a damn telethon. Call security. On second thought, by the time they get there, everyone might be gone. Go back. Get their license plates.”

Bryan went outside. He recognized Deacon Turner opening the trunk of his blue Chevy and copied down his license. It seemed that between preaching on Sunday and visiting parishioners during the week, a minister would have enough to do. Anyway, it was none of his business. Bryan waited for Lila to find her car, then took out his notebook.

In the meantime, she sidled over. “You’re the environmental guy, aren’t you? I’ve been reading about you. You’re the one who brought Rincon Roberts to the hospital. Not everybody would’ve done what you did.”

He wasn’t expecting to strike up a conversation, just wanted to copy down licenses and get out of there as quickly. “I didn’t do nothing. Some reporter got his facts all screwed up.” Everything he said sounded like he was apologetic, but he didn’t mean to be.

“So what do you think?” He also didn’t want to talk about Rincon. The whole thing had been a horrific accident, a young boy dead. The Roberts family had posted pictures of him on telephone poles around the area. The boy’s face was everywhere. “About my car.” Her black Jeep Cherokee was covered in a splotch-work of mud. “I saw you taking a big interest. Anyhow, I can tell you right now it’s not for sale. No way. I don’t care what price you offer. Don’t try and talk me down. No matter what you say, I can’t do it.

That jeep and me, we have a personal relationship. We've traveled to a lot of miles together and unlike people, she's never let me down."

Bryan felt his cheeks glow hot. "I'm sorry, ma'am."

"This isn't the first time we've met, is it? You can call me Lila." She smiled and revealed a perfectly even set of teeth.

"You keep stirring up trouble. That's all."

"I'm a retired teacher who doesn't like lies, Mr. Thurmond, especially when it's about my own health, and if that makes me a troublemaker, I'm at your service. Do you belong to a church, Mr. Thurmond?"

Spunky. She didn't back down easily. "You just keep sticking your nose where it don't belong."

"If I didn't, we wouldn't have the pleasure of meeting, now would we?" He swore she was looking at him funny again, and handed him a flyer. "Give them to your friends and come to the press conference. Really. It would be great to see you. You might learn something."

"Look, Miss Shawn. You don't have the slightest clue about what's going on."

"I beg your pardon."

"You're here," he said. He looked over his shoulder to the plant gate. "But we're inside there dealing with all of this crap every day."

“That’s what I’m talking about,” she said. “We could become friends.”

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Bryan had that same dream—trapped inside his wrecked car and lying in a ditch, a large red eye shining in his face. But this time Jay appeared wearing a white apron and a chef’s hat. “Gonna fix you up, mon cher.”

Jay had learned to cook from his maternal grandmother who lived in Grand Isle, Merrill Babineaux. He stirred gumbo over a three-legged stove. “Crawdads!” he called out, and just like that, a group of egrets landed on the hood of Bryan’s demolished Tundra and regurgitated crawdads, hundreds of mudbugs everywhere, even on Bryan’s mangled body. Jay scooped them up and threw them into his pot. Jay held a wooden spoon to Bryan’s lips. “More pepper?”

Bryan slipped into the ditch, unable to hold on. Jay tasted the broth himself and offered Bryan a spoonful. Bryan reminded him that he was bleeding to death and didn’t know how much longer he’d be alive, let alone be able to taste Jay’s cooking. “But don’t take it personally.”

“Hey, Big Guy. Remember when we played that gig near Billy Bob’s? It was a full moon, as bright as a baby’s bottom, when the bus passed this convent surrounded by a garden?” As he talked, Jay kept shoveling gumbo into Bryan’s open mouth. “A few of the nuns were outside digging around for something. I told you to kill the engine so we could stop and play a few songs. Remember that pretty little nun, the one with a birthmark over her lip?” Bryan nodded. “I’ve been thinking of driving out there. I mean,

my kids are old enough to watch out for themselves. It would take about a day if I drove straight through.”

“Are you crazy, brother? She’s a nun.” A large white cross sprouted up from the ground and somehow began whistling Whang Dang Doodle.

“So what? You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know.”

“Besides, it wasn’t anything like that.” Bryan was feeling stronger. “You were whiskey drunk and demanded that the driver put on the brakes. He actually thought you wanted to take a piss, so he pulled into the convent driveway where there was an orange port-a-potty strung with Christmas lights. They were doing construction work on the south wing of the building. You got off, pulled down your pants, mooned the nuns with your big ass, and shouted up to me, ‘Hey, Bry. Come down here. Quick!’ I thought you were about to collapse in the mud; you were drunk and wobbly. I gave you a hand. ‘Let’s moon ‘em together,’ you said. Why not? I was pretty wasted myself. So the two of us stood there mooning the nuns with the rest of the guys looking out of the bus window looking at the nuns looking at us, until one of them, the pretty little one with a birthmark over her lip, came over and zapped us in the ass with a bb gun like we were squirrels and she was going to skin us both.

“Now you boys get out of here and behave yourselves,” she said.

They both started to laugh. Jay kept feeding Bryan. “That’s right, mon frère. You can’t forget the good times. D’you remember the time we played that really swanky club and stayed in a hotel that had tapestry green curtains? I wore my favorite costume. Darth

Vader? Remember? I thought it would be fun to ride the elevator and tell everyone waiting for their floor, 'You must join the dark side.' People went crazy. Everyone thought I was part of some Star Wars Convention. Then cops came and arrested me for being a public nuisance. Remember, you bailed me out?" They laughed. "That's it. Good to the last drop. Très bonne. N'est-ce pas?"

Bryan had no idea how in his crippled state he'd been able to eat gumbo. He was sure he was dying. Then he realized his hands had grown back. Jay's gumbo had done the trick. After all these years making sure that the lead singer of the Do Daddies stayed sober, his buddy had come through, which is when Bryan woke up in his bedroom, felt his arms and hands just where they ought to be and swung his feet out of bed. He stood up on the linoleum and got ready.

*Chapter Nine—Finding an Opening*

Years later, in a haze of pure exhaust, Dirksen drove Uncle Mikey's truck from his home in Delhi to Baton Rouge where in 1956 he had won a football scholarship to Louisiana State University. Fortunately for Dirksen, the scholarship delayed any further mention of his entering the church since it was clear that he didn't have the talent or the desire for saving souls; however, he did get high marks for playing football. His name was frequently in the papers for scoring the most points for any high school game.

Dirksen thought he could be the first kid from his family to attend LSU, an all-white university. Or maybe it was those years of kids taunting him that had toughened his spirit. LSU had received bad publicity and had almost lost its federal funding. Every night around the kitchen table his parents argued about where to send him to college.

"Do you remember Mr. Johnson who was shot in the head by that vigilante group down by the bayou because he was fishing in the wrong fishing hole? And you went down there with your own shotgun to rescue his wife and children? And what about that boy who almost got killed?"

"Don't think I've forgot," said his father. "I remember every bit."

"Then how can you send Dirksen to Baton Rouge where he doesn't know a single soul?"

"If Dirken's willing to step forward and wave the banner of justice, then we should let him. High time those doors got pushed opened."

“This is about our boy, Zachariah, not your Sunday preaching. I don’t want him getting killed.”

“If no one leads the way, who will? Besides, Dirksen’s got himself a scholarship.” His father was always the practical one in the family. “Are you gonna be the one to tell him he can’t go?”

“You know me better than that.”

“Not gonna be easy, any way you look at it. If the boy has the stamina and the drive, why not?”

“I’ve been praying,” said his mother.

“Don’t worry, Ida. I’ll speak with the boy myself.”

Dirksen told his father that if things got too rough he could take a time-out.

His father shook his head. “That makes no sense at all.”

“You gonna quote Bible?”

“Boy, you’re not so big that you can’t listen.”

“I’m listening, sir.”

“Gotta use your brain. Talk to the Civil Rights Alliance in Baton Rouge.” Most people called it the CRA for short. “Go to their civil disobedience trainings. You need to get yourself ready for whatever’s gonna come your way for sure. And it will.”

“Sir, my coach will give me all the training I need.”

Minister Turner looked at Dirksen with gray eyes that had turned into ice balls. “Son, there’s something you’re not getting. You about to step into a large bucketful of shit. I promised your mother. If you can’t handle it, that’s okay. Won’t make you any less of a man. You can always go to Savior, an all-black college. I’ve spoken with the director. He says any time you want.”

Dirksen arrived in Baton Rouge driving Uncle Mikey’s old truck. The skyline was a halo of refineries that glowed orange and yellow; tall black spider rigs ringed the edge of the city. He pulled into the CRA office to get the name and address of an older black couple. They lived not too far from campus and worked at the Baton Rouge General Medical Center.

“You must be Dirksen Turner,” said Bethany Jameson. She was the CRA woman he had spoken to over the phone. He guessed she was in her mid forties. She looked at him from behind a pair of glasses with tortoise brown frames. “Congratulations. We’ve been expecting you.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” He cut to the chase. “Do you think they’re going to drag my black ass all over campus?”

Ms. Jameson removed her glasses and placed them on her desk. He saw a tall can of lemon furniture polish on a shelf above her chair and could smell that she had recently used it. She was all about business. “Maybe they will,” she said and looked straight at him; polished fingernails rested on the top of a folder stuffed with paper. “But I think the

administration understands that if they want to get federal money, they need to play ball, even if it's football. But just how those white people act, there's no telling. It's mostly how you handle it. And Dirksen, it's not going to be no Sunday picnic, I can guarantee you that."

Dirksen thought about that white man's car jack down at Bayou Mason. "Yes, ma'am. I understand."

Ms. Jameson gave him the name and address of the couple that he would be staying with and told him to head down Route 10 and to get off on Perkins and to look for a store with a billboard in front of a pet store, and if he needed anything, to let her know. "The names of the couple are The Banyans. Cleo and Ed. They're good people. They been working with the CRA for years." Before he left she said, "Dirksen, one more thing."

"Ma'am?"

"Don't give your address to no one. Understand? Use this address. We'll get your mail to you. And if you run into any trouble, give me a call."

"Sure thing."

After he registered, he met the football coach. He was a barrel-sized white man and looked like he had spent his life as a machinist. He had arms like giant yams and wore a whistle around his neck that could burst your eardrums. His name was Coach Heflander. The team called him "Heffie."

“If a wolf is attacking you from behind, what do you do? Don’t answer right away. Think about it. Now what do you think?” Coach schooled them. He said there always was a third way, but they had to learn how to think fast. “This is a contact sport, but you’re not out there to crush each other. I want you to do one thing: be on the ball all the time. Repeat after me: be on the ball. “To do that,” he said, “you have to work together.” Dirksen was a wide receiver. “Your job, Turner,” he spun around to face him on the practice field, “is to do one thing; keep your eyes open and always keep moving. Your job is to carry those passes down to the end zone. And if you do, you can keep your damned scholarship. If you don’t, we’ll ship your black ass out of here. We’ve had two tough seasons. You’re here to make it all better. Got it?”

Dirksen felt the eyes of each member of the team burn a hole clear through his heart, happy to watch his flesh melt into a meaty puddle and run down an irrigation ditch, which only made him do more pushups, so many pushups he lost count. He sprinted through tires, ran an obstacle course sweating and exhausted, his hamstrings ached in knots; he danced around cones to the left and right, then picked up speed. “Quick feet! Quick feet! Keep your nose over your toes,” shouted one of the coaches. The next day it was about passing and blocking, letting the quarterback fade him to the sidelines as he caught the football and locked it beneath his ribs. No one was gonna rake it away from him. Again, the quarterback threw a pass. He tracked the ball with his eyes, watched it in slow motion as it sailed above his head, felt arms and hands ache, a lover anticipating his beloved, caught it inside the diamond of his hands and dragged his left foot along the

sideline, falling across it and still holding on tight. “Good catch,” said Coach Heffie, the first positive thing he’d said to Dirksen in his six weeks of practice.

Dirksen liked the uniforms, purple and gold, two magnificent colors. Inside the locker room, he began to make friends, outside of practice, they rarely spoke to him. If anyone on the team got ugly, coach would say, “Shut up. He’s here to make it all better. Worry about your own fat ass.” When he wasn’t practicing, he was studying. If anyone sat down next to him in the library and said, “Who the hell do you think you are? What gives you the right?” A sea of white faces looked up and didn’t move. Other random students assailed him, stepped up and got in his face. He sized up today’s student, a pimply white boy with a heavy backpack.

Dirksen smiled. “You like football?”

“That’s a stupid question. Geaux Tigers.”

“My name’s Dirksen Turner. I’m the wide receiver for the team.”

“I know exactly who you are,” pimple-face scowled. “Don’t see why they couldn’t find a white boy to play your position. Blacks are getting everything.”

“Look. The only reason I’m here is to keep this team funded. Otherwise, with all this civil rights business spread everywhere over national television and the newspapers, the government’s gonna pull the funding and do you know what happens then?”

“Sure do.”

“What?”

“How do you mean?”

“No more team. Pffft. Hasta La Vista.” Dirksen, snapped his fingers.

“Damn government,” said Pimples.

“Always sticking their noses up where it doesn’t belong.”

“You got that damn straight.”

“It’s a real shame all right. But don’t worry. I won’t kiss your ass or your sister’s cheek either. I’m just here to play football. Got it?”

Then the face of his assailant twisted into a wreck that could back up traffic for ten blocks, a mouth so wreathed in disgust it would scare away food. And before he could say anything else, the boy vanished. All the eyes in the library turned back down at their books. Dirksen would’ve made Heffie proud; he’d found an opening.

*Chapter Ten—Sensorcons*

Bryan relocated his entire crew to a detention pond on the other side of the plant. “Okay with you, sir?” he asked. “The way I see it is...those H<sub>2</sub>S levels are killing us.” Vernon didn’t like it, but he told him to go ahead anyway. “Can’t have men falling down on the job,” and he called Bryan back to his office for another conference call. The speaker box vibrated on the table. Vernon drummed his fingers across the table and scratched his arm that had broken out in an angry-looking rash. He’d told Bryan that it was an allergy or poison ivy, which he hadn’t had since he was a kid.

“Have any Calamine at home? That’s what I always when Jenny got a rash.”

Vernon shushed him and pointed to the box.

“Do you read me, Wolfe? You’ve got to bury this thing fast.”

“Yes, sir. Loud and clear.” Vernon scratched his arm. Bryan shook his head not to.

“Chad tells me you want to flush out the system. You’re talking thousands to shut down operations. Cover up the open ducts from the plant so the gases don’t escape. That should do it.”

“With all due respect, sir, that won’t change anything. It will concentrate the H<sub>2</sub>S when it comes outside to the clarifier,” which is where water was squeezed out from the processed mash. Perlson was breathing heavily on the other side of the line. Vernon

continued, "Then there are lawsuits. Thurmond says there's a report on its way from those River Watchers to the EPA."

"Thurmond?"

"My lead," he reminded.

"From that group of psychos?"

"The same." Vernon knew any mention of the River Watchers would bring Tray's blood to a boil, never mind what it would do to his blood pressure. Bryan listened to him play his one last trump card, citing the last time three years ago when the do-gooders had hired a helicopter to capture video footage of Rand-Atlantic smokestacks that were polluting the town's skyline with ash. Local politicians had been forced to go public with rumors that Rand-Atlantic's plume of pollution was also spreading into the ground water. Ponds weren't lined with clay.

"Get in touch with this guy Lopez. I hear they've instituted new robotics that may be causing the problem. I'll have someone send over his email. And we'll flush out the system per your recommendation."

"Starting when?" Bryan thought that that now they were getting some place. For a moment, he felt hopeful. Why had Perlson not mentioned robotics before?

"Soon enough," said Perlson. "Get those River Rats away from the property." He hung up.

The black speaker box now sat mutely on the table. Vernon and Bryan looked at each other. Perlson's final click meant that something had to be done fast. Bryan wished he could merge Safety and Environmental back together. Everything had been fine before Dwayne had started to wave his dick around. Sure, Vernon could be an asshole, but he knew how to get things done. Two groups meant double work and bogged down requests, reports, and documentation. Plus, Bryan didn't know how he was going to keep the River Watchers from showing up again. "It's in your court," said Vernon.

"Yes, sir...Got the fan for you in my trunk."

Bryan walked to his office and looked at the map on his wall. He honed in on a small bridge at the far west end of the property. He saw it now—the only public area. There were a number of homes in the western section, as well as an elementary school. That had to be how the group was getting access. It was the only place where any truck, car, or vehicle of any kind did not have to pass through a security gate. Everything else was sealed off. They could easily stand on the bridge and take pictures and meter gas emissions. The company had never built anything out here simply because production units were located closer to town, nothing to get access to, nothing except if a person wanted to take a stroll around the stink on a hot evening with the moon in the sky. Bryan could think of other ways he'd rather spend his time. He rang up Vernon to give him the update.

"It's me, sir. Bridge W-42. That's how they're getting access. It's the only area open to the public. We'll have to dismantle both ends."

“Call Dwayne and ask him to help. Don’t want him pointing fingers at us later down the road, and if Dwayne can, you know he will. Gotta get him involved in the thing instead.”

“Any hunch where he got those Sensorcons?”

“Hear he’s playing footsie with Randy Crawford.”

Bryan should’ve figured. How else could he have gotten the equipment? “What do you hear?”

“I’m dying over here. Ask Mark to bring that fan up. Ever been on a cruise, Thurmond?”

“Can’t say that I have, sir.” Vernon was the kind of guy who never volunteered information; he had to be in the right mood, and Bryan could never figure out exactly when that would be, especially if it the temperature hit over ninety. Vernon talked about buying a boat. Actually, he talked about a lot of things like moving to Atlanta’s corporate air-conditioned office, putting his feet up on the desk, and meeting some foxy women who liked to travel.

“All I have to do is put that fan’s on hi-speed, and I’m sailing in the Bahamas, blue water and palm trees, a poor man’s vacation. Just wish this rash would go away. Right now, it’s like I just want to tear my arm off.”

“I’ll you get that Calamine.” His rash didn’t look good, scaly red blisters.

Bryan left Vernon cruising in the Gulf with Jimmy Buffett and returned to his office. He could use a vacation. Maybe he’d water his garden and work on his truck, drive to New Orleans. Got a text message from Jenny. She’d been asked to read her essay on rescue

dogs. He'd texted her back, 'Great job, honey.' She sent back a smiley. Before there was text messaging you had to find a telephone—couldn't splice your life into so many pieces.

Bryan called Dwayne.

"What's happening, bro?"

"I need your help."

"Just ask. We're a team."

Sure they were a team, just as long as Dwayne wasn't trying to get him in the back with a Bowie knife. "I need your crew to work with us tonight doing bridge work."

"Uppers or lowers?"

"Funny guy. We have to dismantle the stone bridge out near the reclamation ponds."

"That doesn't sound like Safety's business. Get your own guys. Or did none of them come to work today?"

"If we don't do this, your ass and mine both are going to be on a shooting range, and Mr. Tray Perlson will be the first one to take a shot. Is that clear enough? It's these River Watcher crazies. We have to cut off their access."

"I read you. But is this legal?"

"When has that ever been your concern?"

“You do whatever you want to do. My team always follows regulations.”

“I know where you got money to buy the Sensorcons. Those meters cost thousands.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“What’s the matter? You going to report me?” Bryan laughed. “Signing off on permits to make friends in high places? Who do you think you’re talking to?” Bryan was bluffing, thought it would take a lot of gall even for someone like Dwayne to pull off a stunt like that. He had been putting in his own requisitions for the last six months without success, not even a kiss my lily-white ass. Vernon had mentioned double-dealing; Bryan was testing out his theory.

“What time did you need us there?”

“Five o’clock on Friday afternoon.”

“And Dwayne. Don’t forget to bring enough pizza for the whole crew—mine and yours. We’re a team, right?”

It was early September, late summer and the air was stagnant, the sky steel grey; the heat had strangled any possible breeze. Safety and environmental crews met at W-42 at a run-down stone bridge about two hundred feet long spanning the Mud. Congealed black goop lined its banks, lava-like in appearance. The crew passed around slices of pepperoni pizza and cans of Cokes. They sat inside their truck beds; some topped off the meal with a cigarette and others stood around holding cellphones, hoping for a call. They finished and got to work, glad to be getting paid overtime. The plan was to do everything as quickly as

possible. They were going to knock out concrete pilings on either edge of the bridge and push the rubble and rebar into the stream. It wouldn't be elegant, but it would get the job done.

Once they'd finished, Bryan asked Dwayne, "So what about those Sensorcons? Need to sample the ponds. Establish baselines. You never know..."

Dwayne surveyed the tops of the pine trees. "No problem. Should be able to get them to you around next week, bro." He shook his truck keys and pulled on the bill of his cap. "How's the Wolfman treating you these days?" He didn't wait for an answer. Dwayne laughed to himself and turned away, each step tracing a line along the edge of the parking lot until he walked past a row of trucks to an outcropping of green. He bent down and pulled out something, stood there dangling a bunch of turnips by their long green stems. Bryan thought they looked like a collection of shrunken heads and he didn't want his to be one of them.

## Chapter Eleven—The Infirmary

The next day, Bryan went to the infirmary, a small white building at the back of the parking lot. A man sat in the waiting room, chewing on his fingernail, examining it from different angles. The door to the examination room flew open. A procession of people walked outside, followed by a black nurse with several gold piercings running up the side of her earlobe. She pushed a man in a wheelchair whose feet were too long to fit on the leg rests. Instead, he held them above the linoleum and displayed the soles of his shoes to anyone who cared to look.

“Hey, Big Guy!”

Ever since Bryan’s promotion, Jay had called him that, reminding his buddy not to take his authority too seriously, especially when it came to friendship. Jay was the real big man standing at 6’2” and proud of a gut that he had cultivated from drinking beer and eating barbecue. He worked in the finishing plant where paper was cut and stacked into five hundred ream packages making their way to a palletizer where they were wrapped in plastic and forklifted to a staging area for shipment throughout the country. “What are you doing around here?”

“Came to see the doc,” said Bryan. “Been feeling nauseous for weeks. ”

“You missed him. But you’re in luck. They’re handing out little blue pills today. Free of charge. A ten-pack each.” The nurse laughed. She wheeled him toward the door. Jay kept referring to her as Nurse Nancy.

“Now Mr. Curtis, you take care of yourself. Get one of those back support belts. You’ve strained yourself again. A man your age shouldn’t be lifting such heavy weight.”

“Won’t get an argument from me. So tell me, when are you going to put me on disability?”

“Only Doc Mason can do that.”

“Mason! He never comes around. Won’t sign anything even if he does. Nurse Nancy, you’re the only one who can save me. Please, honey. Show me a little love.”

She laughed. “My signature on a piece of paper won’t get you squat.”

Jay pointed to Bryan. “Bet you don’t know who that is?”

She looked at him. “Well, honey, I know one thing: It’s not James Brown.”

Jay laughed. “He’s Bryan Thurmond, lead guitarist for the Do Daddies.”

“The do-what?”

“Don’t listen to him,” said Bryan. Many years ago, Bryan and Jay had almost signed a record deal, but it had come to this—working for Rand-Atlantic.

“Bryan is the only one who ever mooned the Shreveport Junior League.”

Nurse Nancy put the brake on Jay’s wheelchair. “Did he really?”

“That’s right. The League didn’t expect him to perform at their annual fundraiser for the Children’s Hospital. But my buddy, Bryan...”

“Please, Jay. Not again.” Bryan had heard this story a hundred times before. Jay took great pleasure in embarrassing him. “You promised.”

Jay didn't listen to him. “You know, my buddy here figured that fundraisers were good places to meet people. That's where he met me. The building was filled with women in white hats, silver sandals with painted toenails and men in seersucker, lots of drinking and milling around and grilled hot dogs. Then there was Bryan standing in the middle of the floor like a girl without a date.

“Poor baby,” Nurse Nancy said.

“A woman took the microphone. She smiled, cool as a cup of frozen yogurt even in ninety-five degree weather. She introduced herself as the chair of the Sustainer Advisory Board. There were there to make an award to Sandra Morgan as the 1986-87 Sustainer of the Year.”

Jay imitated the high voice of the League chairwoman. “Sandra is a supporter of education, presiding as president of the PTA four times and volunteers as an adult literacy tutor and Sunday school teacher.” The woman took her award and sat down. She was as thin as a porcupine quill.

Nurse Nancy, a voluptuous woman who spilled out of her white uniform in several places said, “I hate women like that. They can eat anything they want. Me, I put a slice of bread to my lips, five on the hips. Wish I could change that...don't see how.”

Jay continued. “Bryan kept downing drinks, but on an empty stomach. The poor guy

turned puke green.

“Then a radio announcer from KDIK invited people to bid on any of the fine silent auction items, including a hosted birthday party at a miniature golf park. The announcer asked the crowd, “Ladies and Gents, are you ready to hear more music?”

“That’s when it happened,” Jay said with a crazy smile.

“Bryan ran up to microphone and started to sing ‘I’ve Got Friends in Low Places,’ a great song for the bar crowd, but not right for Shreveport’s Junior League.

“They were bent out of shape. I mean their mouths opened wide enough for a two-engine plane.

“Someone from the Silent Auction tables walked to the front and whispered into the radio announcer’s ear. He walked up to my friend Bry over here and reminded him that he actually hadn’t been invited to sing and would he please relocate himself to a different area of the room tout de suite.

“But you couldn’t stop Bry. No siree. They asked me to grab his guitar and take him outside. Forgot to tell you. I was the security guard. But Bryan was too fast for me, turned around and dropped his pants, and shook his ass in front of God and country. Right there in the middle of everything. League members who were standing closest to Bryan got a full view of his pimply butt. Scared the living daylights out of me, too.

“We took him outside to the parking lot. My partner, another security guard, said he really liked Bryan’s voice and suggested that he contact his cousin who ran a honky-tonk on the Bossier Strip.

“So that’s how it all started.” He smiled. “The next day, Bryan made the front page of the newspaper. Everyone wanted to hear him sing ‘I’ve Got Friends in Low Places’.”

“That’s a good one, Mr. Curtis. You made my day. You most certainly can tell a story.”

“Did you hear what she said, Bry? Made her day. Where are you? Bryan? Bry?”

Bryan heard Jay speaking from inside the bathroom where he was employed over a toilet seat heaving out his guts.

He also heard Nurse Nancy say, “Don’t take this the wrong way, Mr. Curtis, but I think your friend still drinks way too much.”

## Chapter Twelve—Oxygen Tank

“Is something wrong? Why you calling this time of night?”

“Not sure how to put this.”

“Dirksen, stop beating around the bush. What’s wrong? You’re coughing. You called to tell me you’re coughing?”

“Yes, ma’am. Nothing I take seems to help, not even those hot toddies that the Banyans make for me at night. I’m afraid if I don’t measure up to Heffie’s snuff, he’ll kick me out.”

She sighed. “Why don’t you go to the doctor?”

“Ma’am, I was hoping you would help me with that.”

The clinic was packed, mostly with older black men and a few women. Everyone was dressed in jeans. There was a lot of coughing and wheezing. It was the end of the year. Rain hadn’t let up for several weeks. Dirksen took his seat on a brown leather chair. Being around white people drained him, forced him to constantly monitor what he said and how he acted around their self-righteousness. It’s no wonder he’d gotten sick.

Even though he wasn’t feeling well, for the first time in months, he relaxed. He sat next to a man wearing a herringbone cap and hugging an oxygen tank. Dirksen said, “Good morning.”

Other patients were filling out forms. The waiting room was jammed. It looked like a long wait.

“Morning, sir. How come you here?” Dirksen asked.

The man sighed. “Can’t breathe a lick. This baby, she’s my best friend and lover. I go to sleep with her every night and wake up with her every morning. But wish she weren’t so dang skinny. But there are some things a man can’t do nothing about.”

“Trade her in for another model,” came a voice from across the room.

He laughed. “Good one, but she’d still be as cold as ice. Can’t do nothing about that either. My wife died years ago. Now it’s just me and this gal here. She takes good care of me.”

Everyone in the office stopped filling out forms and looked up.

“Hey, young man,” he poked me in the side with his elbow. “You familiar. Ain’t you that young fellow I’ve been reading about in the papers? The one who got a football scholarship to play at LSU? And your daddy’s some big shot Baptist minister in Delhi?”

He was embarrassed. “That’s right, sir.”

“Glad to meet you.” He untangled his fingers from the plastic wire of his oxygen tank and extended his hand. “Hudson James.”

“Dirksen Turner.”

“Why you here?”

“I’ve got a cough that keeps getting worse. If it makes me miss playing, I could lose my scholarship.”

“Look around you, son. Everyone here sick with the same thing. The air is bad. We all know that. There’s not one person sitting here who doesn’t. That’s why my wife died. But we all have to work and we haven’t figured how to do that without breathing.” Then he turned back to his girlfriend and the oxygen tank. “Refineries. You lucky. Probably end up being some minister, but if you do, don’t be one of those Baptists who’ll take your money to buy himself a Caddie.”

“My daddy cares about his congregation. He’s no huckster, sir.”

“Didn’t say he was.”

Dirksen hadn’t spoken to his father since he’d started college, but his mother had written letters. He’d answered and told her how everything was fine and tried to sugarcoat the truth. “Don’t worry about me,” he wrote. “Those white people even talk to me in the library where everyone’s supposed to be quiet.” She’d gotten back, told Dirksen how his father’s health wasn’t too good and how they were trying to see a doctor in Shreveport.

The receptionist called his name. A black doctor wearing white loafers examined him, listened to his chest, looked down his throat, and took his temperature. “Fluid on your lungs. Take one of these pills every four hours and stay home for two days. You’ve got a bad case of bronchitis.”

Every morning Mrs. Banyan came upstairs to check on him. She knocked on his door and carried a tray inside with a teapot in a flowery cozy, sat down in a bridge chair, and asked if he were taking his medicine. In the evening, she came upstairs. "Gotta keep you tip-top. You carrying the ball now for all of us." She poured him tea. "Come down this evening for dinner. It's meatloaf."

Dirksen made it through to the end of the season and remained at LSU long enough to see the school admit more black students. He'd made it to the end zone, one of a handful of black faces who mounted the podium in a cap and gown. Heffie pulled him aside. "Never told you this, but there's lots of colored Heflanders living all over Louisiana and Arkansas."

"Thanks, coach. Appreciate everything you've done for me."

"Get in touch if you need anything." Dirksen thanked him again. "No, I mean it."

After he climbed the podium to receive his diploma, Ms. Jameson told him that his parents were waiting for him at the CRA office. There were balloons and streamers and a table filled with fried chicken wings, red beans and rice, all served in chafing dishes buttressed by salads, biscuits, and desserts. A photographer took pictures, his mother in a blue paisley dress, and his father in one of his double-breasted suits with a beige handkerchief sticking out of its pocket. His father told him for the second time in his life, "Son, I'm proud of you." They hugged. A handful of other black students in the graduating class were there.

"Hey, man," said Dirksen. "Couldn't have done this without you."

“Know about that,” said a student whose skin was as shiny as an eggplant’s. “It’s been a four long years.”

“Could’ve been worse, brother.” They shook hands. “Wish you luck.”

“You too. We gonna need it.”

In the evening, Cal called to congratulate Dirksen. “You mean they didn’t send you to culinary school so you could work in somebody’s kitchen? What you gonna do with some teaching degree?”

“What do you think? Gonna teach.”

“Someone gonna pay you?”

“Tell me, Cal. How many peanut butters you eating these days?”

“Not a one. I’m working. Can afford to buy steak anytime I want. So why don’t you join me working pipelines, Dirksen? Move to Arkansas. I can help you find a job.”

In a few weeks, he packed up and drove to Hentsbury, only Cal wasn’t there. He was working pipelines. Dirksen visited local schools, drove to places that reminded him of home, places located near landfills and town dumps, but still dedicated to educating children.

“Could use another teacher. Can’t afford to pay ‘em though.”

“You have a strong background. Thanks for taking the time to drive out here.”

“From Louisiana? Maybe they got jobs down there. I’ll keep your application on file.”

For several weeks he stayed inside a motel room and watched reruns of I Love Lucy. He couldn’t teach at the white schools. He put in an application at Rand-Atlantic, the local pulp and paper mill. It was decent money, too, especially if he worked nights. The work was hard in the palletizer; all night he loaded trucks with boxes of cardboard and paper. He didn’t know what else to do. His father wrote and told him not to give up. But after four years of college and looking for a teaching job without success, he was getting frustrated. He prayed for someone special to enter his life. He had gone on dates with the same result: small talk, laughter, an exchange of telephone numbers that occasionally led to more phone calls, then silence. His mother had told him, “There’s a woman out there waiting for you. The Lord has a plan for each one of us.”

The Lord was taking his time. Dirksen was twenty-six and single. He went to work and came home every night to heat up a plate in his microwave. Actually, he came home almost every night. Sometimes he went with his friend Jack to the neighborhood bar and sat down to drink a few cold beers before facing the solitude of his apartment.

She was sitting at the bar holding a drink and flashing a smile that seemed to reach as far as San Antonio, Texas. Cal was in between pipeline jobs and back in Hentsbury for several weeks. She was at the bar talking to another woman. “Who she?” he whispered to Cal. Instead of answering, Cal took Dirksen’s elbow and pulled him over to the bar. “Man, let go. You don’t need to be pulling on my shirt.” But there he was standing in front of a woman with a green dress and black high heels. Dirksen had just gotten off

from work. He was sweaty and unshaven, but he wanted to take her hand and move his fingers along her slender arm that was draped over the back of a chair. She had high cheekbones and reddish-brown skin with a smile that lit up a dark corner of the bar.

“Jeannette Rawls, this is Dirksen Turner. He’s one of the hardest working brothers I know.” He winked. “And he also goes to church.”

She turned to her friend who wasn’t half bad-looking either, a tall woman. “My friend, Nell Abrams,” she said. “This is my cousin Cal Roberts and this here is Dirksen Turner.”

“Dirksen and Cal returned to their table. “What were you thinking, man?”

“Hey. You said you wanted to meet her.”

“She your cousin for real?”

“I keep trying to tell you, but you don’t believe me—I’m one of those Good Samaritan types.”

The next time Dirksen saw Jeannette, Cal introduced them again. “No need,” she smiled.

“I remember, Dirksen,” and extended her hand. Dirksen ran his eyes along the sleeve of her blouse, past her slender neck, circled around her ear lobe and up to her eyes. They smiled. She had moved to Hentsbury to be with her mom and was studying to teach elementary school. After awhile, they started to date. “You going to work at that mill your whole life, Deacon Turner?” she asked. “Or you got something else planned?”

He did have something else planned. They got married and raised two sons, Malcolm and Kwame. By the time the boys got grown and left, Turner’s father had died in Delhi. His

mother held on for a few more years. Uncle Mikey, who was ten years younger than his father, took over as minister. He said desegregation had ruined his business because his black customers had started buying from white stores just because they could. Anyway, he said his Aunt Millie was tired of cooking up fried chicken. It was time for the two of them to set out on a new path, and somewhere up in heaven, he knew his brother, the minister, approved.

Uncle Mikey had stopped selling alcohol.

And after awhile, Dirksen became Deacon Turner.

*Chapter Thirteen—The Fisherman*

Shields could think like a fish. “Tell us how you do it,” his friends said. “Tell us your secret.” Noreen listened with her parents as her grandfather stood before a crowd of flashing cameras at the boat dock on Lake Maumelle. He was about to collect a prize for catching a record bass that weighed twenty-six pounds. “Wiggle your line.” He shook his hand as if he were shaking popcorn over an open fire. “Attracts those fish like a dinner bell. Nothing else to it.”

“C’mon, Ray.” The crowd gathered around the dock, most of them wearing white Ronsen’s Fishing Lodge caps. “Tell us the truth!”

This was the third year in a row that Shields had been awarded a fishing trophy. Water licked the edge of the pier as the crowd waited for his response.

Shields silenced the rabble with a raised hand until it became quiet enough for his pronouncement. As the sun thinned out over the lake and over the pine trees, he shared his secret. All eyes were upon him, a tall man. The wind skimmed across the water in gentle ripples. “I play video games,” her grandfather had said. He flexed his wrist a few times just to demonstrate. “Keeps my wrist flexible. Keeps away arthritis.” No one believed a word, but everyone applauded. No fisherman worth his salt revealed his secrets. Everyone packed away their coolers and called it a day. But even without receiving an award, Shields was famous, related to the town’s original founding family in a place where lineage counted for a lot, even more than fishing trophies. But those were

days when her grandfather could still get out of the house. Not anymore. Every Friday afternoon Noreen brought over his groceries.

He sat in a green recliner in front of the TV. "Don't bother getting up." She kissed him on the cheek, his face overgrown in a cactus of stubble.

"How's my favorite granddaughter?"

"Fine," she said. "Wait a sec. I need to put these in the refrig."

"Didn't forget the beer, did you?" He asked her the same question every week.

She carried in the last bag from the trunk. "See what I got for you? Bananas and carrots."

"Stop right there. Do I look like some damn rabbit?"

She remained cheerful. "There's ranch dressing. Comes in the package." Noreen went into the kitchen and put away cans of soup. The ones she'd bought last week were gone.

She returned to the living room. "Better?"

"Now that you're here." Shields had a small aquarium that sat on top of his bookcase.

"How're your Mollies doing?"

"Don't know. Morton's been peevish. Waves his fins at Grimelda, but she doesn't seem to care, just limps around. Guess they're getting old like me."

Shields told her to sit in the opposite chair. He stared out the window at the telephone pole in the front lawn. "Something else. Rosie forgot to fill the birdfeeder."

“Rosie’s dead,” said Noreen. “She died seven years ago. You mean Kim, your housekeeper.”

“Rosie never forgets a thing.”

Noreen hated when he had these lapses. “Don’t you remember, Grandpa? Grandma Rosie had cancer. We went to her funeral together.” She didn’t like thinking of Pops as being senile and feeble. He had just turned eighty-seven. Every week she watched him drift further away. In her mind, he was a powerful man who had always commanded the respect of his family and community, someone she could always talk to about what lay deepest in her heart. She’d had never found it easy to draw that curtain open for many other people.

She touched his arm. “Pops? You okay?”

“Can’t a man think, or is there some law against that too? I liked it better when you lived with me.”

“Aw, Pops.”

“You’re my sugar cookie. Remember?” He pinched her cheek.

“Yeah, Pops. I love you, too.” They hugged. Noreen looked at her watch. She had told Mark she’d be back home in time for his next shift. He was watching Little Raymond.

Noreen placed the carrots and dressing on a walnut table that had come from St. Louis, part of the Shields family inheritance. They had second and third cousins littered all over

southern Arkansas and Louisiana whom she saw every few years at reunions where they barbecued vast quantities of meat—beef ribs, pork shoulder, and venison steaks.

“When are you going to bring over Little Raymond so that I can see my great-grandson? Think I’ll scare him?”

“Don’t be silly, Grandpa. Next weekend,” she said. “I got a car seat now. Maybe we can come by sooner.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

She disappeared for a moment into the kitchen. “Here you go.”

He held the pistol of an index finger up to his forehead. “Water? Trying to kill me?”

“Take your medicine and don’t give me any more of your guff.” Noreen handed over several pills.

Shields sighed, took a gulp and swished the beer along the roof of his mouth. “Thanks, little lady.”

“Momma always used to call me that.

“Rosie.” He’d gotten that one wrong also. Her mother’s name was Dina, but this time she didn’t correct him. There was no point in frustrating him more. He kept tapping his fingers on the arm of the recliner, covered his hand with the other and asked, “How’s Vernon making out?”

“Never stops working.” Noreen dipped the carrots in the ranch dressing. Since she’d started nursing Little Raymond, she stayed hungry all the time.

“That’s what men do.”

“Maybe, but that’s all he ever does. Thinks the mill will disappear if he isn’t there. You and Grandma took time to go on trips. Plus, he hates Mark.” Her grandfather liked Mark, especially since he knew the best fishing holes for whatever else was biting. “Mark says that the plant is in bad shape. That’s what Bryan says.”

“Deacon Turner. Kim’s friend. He tells me stuff.”

“What kinds of stuff?”

“Mostly football scores.”

“C’mon, Pops. I talk to Kim every day. You went to a meeting at the Deacon’s church. She even asked if I thought it was a good idea. Told her you’re a hard-headed Arkansas mule and none of your pills was ever gonna change that.”

“Spying on me now, are you?”

Now he was sounding like his old self. The meds had kicked in. “Mark’s working with Bryan out at the ponds.”

“Vernon would like Mark better if you had a ring on your finger.”

His eyes were beginning to droop. “I’ll bring Little Raymond over as soon as I can.” She laced her arm inside his, and slowly escorted him to the bedroom.

He stopped at the kitchen. “Why do you always buy me so much food? Think I’m gonna die?”

“I get food to keep you healthy.”

He snapped his fingers, but there was no sound. He rescued a beer from the refrigerator and tucked it under his arm. Noreen helped him to lie down in his bed. “Get my Game Boy.”

“Grandpa?”

“Over there,” and he pointed to the top of the dresser where her Grandmother Rosie’s picture stood in a picture frame.

He began to play with the console. “Gotta keep my casting wrist in good shape.” He moved it stiffly around. “I’m going fishing this weekend.”

“Grandpa?”

“With my Rosie.”

Noreen kissed him on his forehead. She found a package of birdseed in the garage, filled up the feeders and left.

She got ready to bring the baby to his house the following week. All she had to do was find a clean outfit, a sailor suit. She changed it for a top printed with a blue fish. It was after ten o’clock when she threaded his arms through a confusion of seat belts.

“Ready to see your paw-paw?” The baby responded with a gurgle. She checked the rearview mirror and waved to him in the back seat. They pulled up into Raymond’s driveway, car wheels crunching on the gravel like Cheerios. Kim opened the door.

“This must be Little Raymond,” she said, as she lifted the baby from Noreen’s arms. “Aren’t you a handful?” The baby wailed. “Look at that hair!” His skull was filling in with reddish fuzz. “He looks just like a Shields!”

Noreen smiled. “Where’s Grandpa?”

“Resting. Just gave him his morning pills. Mr. Raymond’s got some new painkillers.” Kim returned the baby to Noreen’s outstretched arms and picked up a bag that was big enough to hold a small filing cabinet. She gave the baby one last hug. “I’m going to Shreveport this weekend to see my grandchildren.” Kim said how she was planning to take her grandkids to the aquarium; they were so excited and she had packed her most comfortable pair of walking shoes. “It’s my knees. Guess they don’t walk the way they used to. I don’t want to hear a word about replacements. I like the originals that God gave me.” She went to the carport and waved good-bye.

Noreen carried Raymond into the bedroom. “Pops?”

He looked up from his covers. Noreen raised his pillows so he could sit up. “Look who I brought!”

“Hand him over.”

Raymond examined his great-grandson, touched his feet, his hands, and honked his nose twice. The boy looked up at the man's grizzled face and smiled. "You did good," he said. He sang in a scratchy voice. "Fill you up with ice cream, buy you bicycles, teach you to read the stars."

Then his face contorted. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

He gave her back Little Raymond. "Hand me my cigs." Noreen didn't move. "Then give me a beer, but leave the boy here. We're gonna have a heart-to-heart talk about women, aren't we, son? Always telling a man what he should and shouldn't do."

"Behave yourself." She took out her cellphone and snapped a picture of Pops with Little Raymond. Noreen wanted to show the photo to her son when he got older. The light wasn't that great. "Got it. Thanks."

In a few moments she handed her grandfather his drink. He sat with the baby. "How are you and Mark doing?"

"He's getting more work at the plant."

The plant. For him, that was lifetimes ago. Her grandfather had been a supervisor where they made chemical wood pulp by dissolving wood chips from stripped logs in a digester, a bubble bath of soda and sulfur, which left a brown pulp—lumpy like the oatmeal Kim tried to feed him every morning. It was getting so he couldn't even wash himself.

At first, Noreen had tried to help until he'd insisted that she hire Kim, her grandfather's old friend who had retired from the library. Kim soaped him above his waist and washed him off with a portable showerhead.

His old age had become a ceremony of losses, one loss following another.

*Chapter Fourteen—Press Conference*

The press conference was being held inside the civic room of the Hentsbury Library. Bryan was one of the first to arrive. He wished he could disguise himself, wear a beard or something to make it less obvious that he was in the house. He chided himself for arriving early, a habit he couldn't seem to break after all those years of setting up sound systems. Saw several Economy Dirt Mover trucks, a messy outfit carrying water containers. Bryan knew every one of Rand-Atlantic's contractors, watched the vehicle as it drove toward the reclamation ponds, possibly one of Dwayne's hunting buddies who needed a few extra bucks, rusted chains creaking back and forward up the street. Standing there, he felt the air clinging to his face like a gauze cloth. A chorus line of sunflowers in hung their necks in the morning heat. He gladly slipped inside the air-conditioned library. Thankfully, Lila didn't see him; she was busy placing copies of a report on several rows of chairs, her long sumac-colored braid moved from side to side. He checked his cellphone. No messages from Vernon. He watched her move across the room. She was attractive in an odd sort of way, the kind of woman who spent less time in thinking about her appearance than she did about getting things done, which was unlike most of the women he'd met, more fixated on attracting a man to help support a bunch of kids than anything. He called them Venus Fly Traps although he'd never say that in mixed company without suffering a public stoning. Bryan knew when to keep his mouth shut, one of qualities he'd developed growing up in a household where saying the wrong thing was punishable by a beating from an alcoholic man who happened to be his adopted father. He understood the deadbeat husband thing; look at Vernon who'd been a woman-

chaser during his entire marriage, or at least, that's what the broadsides said. He guessed there were no easy answers, and instead, caught himself checking Lila's hand for a marriage band. He had to stop thinking like that. It could only end badly. Plus, she was the wrong kind of woman, one of those River Watcher crazies. He wished Vernon hadn't made him come.

The River Watchers had printed red T-shirts for all of their members with the message in large black letters, Don't Buy Rand-Atlantic's Bunk. To make the occasion even more festive, they'd draped a red, white, and blue banner behind the podium saying, the Committee for Rincon Roberts. Posters of Rincon were tacked to the walls, two eyes stared down at him with the same question that Jenny had asked him, why didn't you do more?

Lila spoke to a small clot of people, explained how a retired scientist with more than thirty years in the hazardous materials industry, including a stint at Cape Canaveral decontaminating astronauts on their return trips from the moon, had authored the report. "She'll be here soon," Lila said. "Her background is stellar. She's got the sheepskins to prove it." Hentsbury's mayor had hedged; she said he must have reelection on his mind. Then there were the parent groups, Lions Clubs, and churches. Plus there were residents from Hentsbury. She had an extra box of press kits in the trunk of her car and asked somebody to get them. Did she think that the entire Washington press corps was going to show up? For her sake, he hoped the press conference wouldn't turn out to be a total bust.

Lila's cellphone rang, placed it on speaker as she moved around. "Deacon Turner? Where are you?"

"Parking."

This was turning out to be a regular homecoming party. Deacon Turner had been in the papers all last week. He'd filed another complaint against Rand-Atlantic. People began to enter the room. The press conference had been scheduled for ten in the morning. The floor was covered with a beige rug, which looked brown from a lifetime of coffee spills. Another banner, this one for a "Summer Reading Contest," was tacked along the back wall. He guessed she'd moved it.

Once again, he checked his cellphone. Vernon had a fit earlier this morning about H<sub>2</sub>S readings at the clarifier. Bryan's men had been ordered to dissolve a chemical in the detention ponds to make the rotten-egg smell undetectable, but actually the chemical did nothing about the actual presence of the gas. Another member of the crew, dizzy and retching, had gone to the infirmary. A doctor had insisted that he was drunk. The guy was a Baptist and he only drank Sprite.

Chad Sweeney darted into a chair. Next came Randy Crawford. Bryan recognized him from around the place. Vernon knew him. Crawford was the head of the Arkansas Environmental Board, a man who listed all his degrees and certificates on the front and back of his business card, which he generously gave out to people in Baton Rouge at the board's quarterly meetings. He wore a string tie and an American flag pinned to his jacket lapel and looked like the type of middle-aged man who kept in shape by going to

the gym. Deacon Turner entered with Nell and Kim newly constituted as the Committee for Rincon Roberts. The Deacon hugged Lila for several moments and whispered into her ear. They sat down.

“Where’s Jeannette?” asked Lila. Jeannette was the Deacon’s wife.

“Had to go to the hospital. Nothing serious. Just tests. Sorry she can’t be here.”

Before the door closed, a woman saw the press release taped to the door and entered with her baby.

“Thank you for coming here this morning.” She spoke clearly and confidently. “My name is Lila Shawn and I am chair of the local River Watchers. “Our purpose is to restore the Ouachita River. The River Watchers are also members of the national River Action Network, and it is on behalf of these two organizations that I welcome you here today.

“Now I want to introduce Kay Almontez, one of the scientists who prepared the report. Earlier on in her career she trained with the top brass in Region 6, among them John Weatherall from the EPA’s Investigatory Unit.”

Kay came up to the podium, a woman who was more used to talking to academics and at Congressional hearings than to the general public, but she took to her new role immediately and talked about what each statistic meant. She sat behind her computer and pulled up another PowerPoint screen pointing to each area with a red laser dot. “The city of Hentsbury had the highest cancer rate in Arkansas, especially around the area of run-off from the plant.” She went on to explain the dangers from vapors, gasses, odors, and other contaminants that entered the industrial wastewater treatment system through a

series of pipes, open ditches, ponds and lagoons, and explained how the wastewater discharged through the various facilities of Rand-Atlantic and passed along the Ouachita River, was composed of chemicals including chlorides and chloride compounds, sulfides and sulfide compounds, formaldehyde, and manganese compounds that were all dangerous to health. She sipped her water bottle. The audience waited. She spent the next fifteen minutes detailing the effects of airborne chemicals that were known to cause respiratory irritation and disease, inflammation of the sinuses and eyes, irritation of the skin, loss of sleep, vomiting, headaches, worry, frustration, aggravation, and asthma. The company's wastewater system was open throughout its entire length, allowing these noxious emissions. "Hydrogen sulfide blocks cellular respiration and results in cellular anoxia," she said, "which means your body doesn't get what it needs to live—oxygen—causing your to cells die."

Okay. As far as Bryan was concerned, she knew her data; he'd give her that much, but strongly objected to the way she was stirring up people. The situation couldn't be that bad. Why would the company fuck up the soil, air, and water when they needed people to work at the mill, people who lived here in Hentsbury or someone like himself who drove to the plant every day to keep everything regulated and in bounds? She was still pointing to charts when another woman dressed in an orange and white striped top and wearing bright green Crocs opened the door; her hands were weighed down by two shopping bags. "Excuse me. Is this the Library Friends meeting?" She looked around in a panic. "I'm the one who brought the cups for the beginning of the school year Walk-a-Thon. All that soda! Now the parents won't be able to serve drinks."

“Try the elementary school around the corner,” suggested Lila, trying to be polite. The woman retrieved her bags. “Whoa! Looks like you’re having some important meeting.” She looked at Rincon’s poster around the room and glanced at Lila’s stack of reports. “I bet this is about that Roberts boy.” The woman was obviously not the sharpest pencil in the box. “Terrible, terrible. I read about it in the newspaper. Why anyone lives out in that sinkhole is beyond me. Wouldn’t want my kids living out there. Those people should stop complaining, pack up their things, and move out. Don’t know why they stay. It’s their fault and they just want to make trouble. But you can’t tell people what to do now-a-days, can you? Especially young people. My kids especially.”

Lila held open the door. “Remember those sodas. Library Friends are waiting.”

“Oh, my gosh. That’s right.” She waved good-bye. “So sorry.” She bowed and left.

Everyone watched the door close slowly. Lila asked, “Questions?”

The editor from Arkansas State shielded an iPad beneath his arm. “Can you say more about why you think this is happening?”

“Rand-Atlantic is emptying mill pollutants into the Mud River, which feeds downstream into the Ouachita.” Ms. Almontez was about to continue when Randy Crawford raised his hand.

“Ma’am, that is a gross misrepresentation.”

“Thank you, Mr. Crawford. Can you please introduce yourself?” Lila seemed to know exactly who he was.

For a moment, Randy ducked inside his shirt collar and seemed mortified that he had spoken at all. "I'm Randy Crawford," he said, "from the Arkansas Environmental Board, but I'm speaking for myself today. I'm speaking as a private citizen."

"And as a private citizen, can you tell us why you think it is a gross misrepresentation?"

He sighed. "Rand-Atlantic has a permit to use the Mud River. Everything is legal."

"Issued and certified by your department," she said. "I thought the federal Clean Water Act prevented anything like that from happening especially if there was anything alive swimming in its waters. Isn't that so Mr. Crawford? Did you illegally sign-off on those papers?" That was quite a charge. Bryan waited to hear Crawford's answer.

"Those permits were certified on the basis of there being no life in the Mud River, a criteria used to qualify it for protection under the federal guidelines of the Clean Water Act. Anyway, there will be a public hearing to clear up this matter, conducted by a special investigative team. They're probably on their way to Hentsbury right now. So you see, you're wasting your time. You River Botchers or whatever it is you call yourselves."

He turned to directly look at Lila, and said, "You are a bunch of cry babies," a comment that elicited a round of boos. Members of the River chanted, "Leave now, Leave now."

Randy sat back down in his seat and crossed his arms over his chest and stuck his feet into the aisle, offering to trip anyone who dared to cross his path free of charge.

Someone else spoke. "Let me introduce myself," he said, his tongue hitting the fence of his front teeth. "My name is Chad Sweeney from the Atlanta office of Rand-Atlantic.

And I'd like to know what kind of science has been used to establish these "contaminant"

baselines? Our company is a good community partner and we've been cleaning up effluents for years. This whole thing is exaggerated by people who have an axe to grind, and in all due respect, Ms. Almontez; I think you and your friends are hiding a sharp one. Back where I come from, we call that an agenda."

Bryan hated that he agreed with the man.

"Really, Mr. Sweeney?" said Kay Almontez, unperturbed. "We've been monitoring the ponds for the last year, that is, until your office cut off our access. Why did you find it necessary to fence off your property?"

Chad Idiot Sweeney didn't have a good answer.

"Any more questions?" asked Lila. She looked around. "The laboratory in Little Rock analyzed Hentsbury's water. I advise you to boil your tap water before you use it. Or buy bottled drinking water. There's also information in the back about a filtering system. If you'd like to know how to contact Nell and her committee, speak to them after the meeting."

Bryan picked up two copies of the report from the front table—one for him and one for Vernon.

Crawford marched to the front of the room. Lila handed him a report. He brushed aside her hand. "I have copies. Actually several."

"Delighted that you're taking such an interest." Bryan thumbed through his report; it looked like at least two night's worth of reading.

“That’s one way of putting it.” Crawford whispered in a guttural voice, “You and your River Watcher friends better watch out.” Randy’s face turned a shade of apoplectic red. He picked up the remaining pile of reports from the table, and hurled them to the floor, stomping them with his feet.

Bryan couldn’t just sit there. “Excuse me, Mr. Crawford,” he said. “I think you owe the lady here an apology.”

“And who the hell are you?”

“Does it matter?”

People surrounded Nell. Red T-shirts gathered around Lila and ingested her into their midst. They cheered as Randy Crawford left the room and slammed the door.

“A word, Ms. Shawn?” A man identified himself as a reporter from WBRZ in Baton Rouge and pushed his way to her, holding a microphone. “The Arkansas Environmental Board caused a ruckus today at your press conference. Can you tell us what happened?”

“Obviously, Mr. Crawford is afraid that people may find out the truth about what’s happening. Talk to Ms. Almontez and Nell Roberts. They’re the ones with the real story.”

A reporter saw Bryan’s Rand-Atlantic logo and approached him, “I’m just a private citizen..” If he said anything, he’d be out of a job. Bryan hung toward the back of the room, thought Lila could use help in carrying her boxes outside, seemed like everyone was too busy talking about Randy Crawford.

Deacon Turner pointed to his watch. “We have to be out by three. I’ll give you a hand.”

A woman approached. Bryan recognized her from someplace—her open smile. She introduced herself. “My husband Mark works for you,” she said. “I’m Noreen Wolfe, Vernon’s daughter.”

“Miss Noreen.” He shook her extended hand. “I’ve heard all about you,” which was true. Vernon always bragged about Noreen becoming a CPA.

Noreen stuffed Lila’s report into the diaper bag. “My grandfather used to work at the mill. He wanted me to pick up a report. Okay if I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

Noreen strapped her baby into the stroller and handed him a toy. The baby gnawed at the head of a yellow dinosaur. “His name is Raymond; named him after my grandfather.” She removed her car keys and dangled them in front of Little Raymond, who had thrown the stuffed dinosaur to the ground. She bent down to pick it up and handed it back to the baby, who continued chewing the dinosaur’s head. “Teething,” she said.

“Little fella’s at that age.” Bryan remembered when Jenny was teething. At night, he’d dip his finger in whiskey and run it over her gums. Maybe it hadn’t been the best therapy, but it worked.

Noreen nodded. “So what do you think?” She pointed to the copy of the press conference report that was curled up inside Bryan’s hand.

“What do you mean?” Actually, he knew exactly what she meant. She bent down again to pick up the dinosaur. “Something has to be done, but I’m not sure just what.”

The baby cried and reached toward her. Noreen removed him from the stroller and walked him around. "I want to move back to Shreveport. I worry about raising him here, worry he'll get sick. Wait just a moment...." She handed Raymond to Bryan and organized her diaper bag, then took the baby back. "Mark always says good things about you."

"Bends my ear about Little Raymond all the time."

She smiled. "Nice meeting you, Bryan."

"You too, Miss Noreen." He watched her walk through the door. A weight settled on his stomach. He'd worked hard to simplify his life and now this, all of it. It wasn't up to him to make decisions. Vernon was in charge. Bryan was the guy who rode tagged along in the side bucket. He'd do anything he had to keep things at an even keel, including getting Vernon an air conditioner. All he wanted was to go to work, do his job, and come home at night, but since he'd run into Lila, things had started to go afoul and he could trace it back to that exact day when he'd spotted her on the bridge, right around the same time he'd found Rincon on his bicycle, another thankless event. No wonder Vernon bad-mouthed the River Watchers. He'd had his own run-ins and knew exactly what to expect—trouble. Bryan understood how to fix things and how to play music—those were the two things he was good at—he was a lover, not a fighter, and kicked himself for hanging around, waiting for Lila like some school boy for her to finish packing her reports that called out Rand-Atlantic as some house of cards that was ready to fall apart. He'd worked hard to make the place safe for his team; he took his job seriously. No, he

repeated to himself, wasn't going get involved. There were some lines a man couldn't cross. How could he? It was a recipe for disaster. Look at Frankie and Johnnie, Jolene, and every one of those songs he'd learned that were about getting involved with the wrong people. He offered to carry her boxes outside. Only because he wanted to ask her about that investigative team, about something Randy had said, which sounded important, something he and Vernon should know about. She talked to people on the way out and finally popped open the trunk in the parking lot. He stared at her hand. There was not a single gold ring in sight.

*Chapter Fifteen—Lila*

Lila called Kay Almontez to make sure the scientist had arrived safely in Little Rock and then began her own trek home, a distance of about two large cups of coffee sipped slowly while driving her vehicle back to Louisiana. She placed Nell's petitions in a folder; she didn't want the papers to get lost on the back seat. Stretches of loblolly pine lined the road. White hibiscus grew in clumps along the highway.

Lila was no stranger to the area. As a young girl, she had played around the Silver River, a shining stretch that ambled between the Little Cosatott further upstream, and the Ouachita that made its way to Louisiana. She couldn't wait until her Grandfather Leo picked her up on the weekend. His truck was large enough to haul a lawn tractor or anything else that required fixing. He'd pull up alongside the road and cast for rainbow trout and black bass, eating baloney sandwiches thick with mustard. He'd taught her about the waterfowl that made their home along the riverbank, dozens of egrets stalking the water with eyes as red as Christmas. She knew different times of the year for rails, gallinules, and snipes. But her grandfather wasn't a hunter. He preferred to watch, not shoot birds. There weren't the same variety of birds anymore, not like when he used to lift her by her waist so she could climb into his truck where the seat was split down the middle, an orange foam spilling out like roe from a dead fish's belly.

"Look up, girl!" He'd point through the windshield to the sky above them. "See them?" Sometimes a wild turkey would wander out from the brush and rustle its fan

feathers. If she got lucky, she'd find one on the ground.

Lila had come from a family of rock-rib Republicans who had taught her to pursue the harder right rather than an easier wrong. Many of them, like her Grandfather Leo, had served in the U.S. Army. Whenever her college friends from up north teased her about not using her biology degree to apply for a big city position, she told them, "But I'd be too far away from home." She came back to Monroe and taught high school biology. She'd received a commendation for excellence in teaching, but people at church started to look at her funny. They believed she held unorthodox views and was happy to share them. Looking back, maybe she should've listened to her husband Gerard, who talked about how they were going to spend their golden years together. Gerard had been fifteen years her senior.

"We can visit Paris. See the Eiffel Tower. Walk along the Champs Elysees." He had taken out visitor guides from the library and wanted to sit down on the couch and look at them together, but Lila's mind was on other things. There was a dirt racetrack that had been built across the highway from where they lived. The noise was unbearable, especially on weekends. The noise made the horses on the ranch nervous. The geldings wheeled back and forth along a corral railing to escape the high-pitched whine. Lila wanted to get to the bottom of this insult. The sound was deafening, upsetting her as she cut out grocery coupons from the local newspaper.

"You go," said Gerard. "I'll take care of Jimmie." Their oldest dog was just back from the vet's. "Sure you don't want to come along?" She knew the answer.

There was a college football game on TV—LSU versus Texas. “No, you go ahead.” She left and paid her entrance fee at the dirt track races.

Lila saw that many people had brought along their own chairs and positioned them right against the track railings. Kids sat, ears covered with mufflers. Once the pack got the “green” go flag, there was the noise of nine motors vying for first spot, shooting out along the edge and then allowing centrifugal force to shove a car back to the inside track where cars hugged the curve to block other competitors.

She decided to pay the local police jury a visit to find out exactly how the dirt track practically had been built in her back yard, especially without her knowing. Reading through microfiche, she discovered that the permit for the track had been awarded by the police jurors, the parish’s governing body, to one of the member’s son-in-laws. It also happened to violate zoning regulations. Lila attended a meeting. Most of the chairs were empty and stacked on the side of the room. She waited for the secretary to finish reading the minutes. She raised her hand. “My name is Lila Shawn. I live half a mile from the dirt track.”

They nodded, proud that they had invented a project to inject tax money into the parish. But they’d never seen this woman. They usually handled their business in relative private. What was she doing here? “Isn’t your son-in-law Geoffrey Howard?” Lila waited for his answer.

“Why yes.” The juror had no reason to deny the connection. “Didn’t you award the racetrack contract to him?”

The juror sucked on a Tootsie roll lollypop that protruded from his cheek in a large lump and nodded.

“But that’s a conflict of interest.”

He laughed at her naiveté. “We didn’t have a conflict.” He took another suck on the lollypop. But sensing a growing discomfort among the other four jurors who sat around the oak table with an American flag draped behind their oak desk, he asked, “What exactly are you getting at, ma’am?”

“This is a residential area that prohibits commercial development. There’s a zoning ordinance in place.”

The five jurors thanked her for her comments and hoped to God that they would never see her face at another meeting as long as they served as police jurors. But they were wrong about that, too.

Lila kept showing up, and to make matters worse, she brought along other people. It was as if the dirt track had been a cannon shooting her off into a career of activism as she saluted the people waving to her from below. Whenever the locals had problems with a water bill or plant emissions, dumping, or any other shenanigans, they called Lila. “She’ll help you.”

She told Gerard about each incident. He liked to hear her stories and knew that she was going to do what she wanted no matter what he said, which is exactly how they had remained married for thirty-three years. She remembered how Gerard always told his

friends that being a horse trainer was the best preparation he ever had for a lifelong marriage.

But one morning, she stood at the breakfast bar watching Gerard open the refrigerator, struggling, as if the door weighed hundreds of pounds, a moment that would be forever emblazoned in her memory. Gerard had survived several bypass surgeries. He had popped open a can of iced tea. The next moment, she watched him crumple to the floor like a pile of clothes from the dryer. Lila called 911. Paramedics rushed him to the hospital. She sat in a waiting room and when the doctor's face reappeared in the evening, she didn't have to ask. It had been a fatal heart attack.

Lila felt Gerard's absence the way an amputee experiences phantom pain. For months she couldn't sleep; instead, she got up in the middle of the night to balance her checkbook. She rolled over to his side of the bed just to feel the outline of his body. She should've gone to Paris, but it was too late. Three years had passed since he died. He had always been there, and Lila wondered if she had returned the favor, went through anniversary and birthday cards that he'd always leave in special places with sweet notes that made her smile. For too long loneliness had been her close companion. She decided not to just sit around. Lila taught Sunday school and started to call her friends. What kind of world would her students inhabit if they didn't understand right from wrong, if they didn't know when someone was offering them a discounted load of bullshit? From far off, Gerard agreed. He didn't want her to mourn for what could have been. "And Lila honey," were his last words before she knew he made his way off to heaven, "I'll always be there. You can count on it."