

The Cotton King

By Michael Stafford

Chapter 1

Two for the Road

The road that passes for Highway 51, Illinois State Highway 51 to be exact, is a meandering stretch of blacktop pavement that curves its way through Southern Illinois, running north to south, following the contours of its western neighbor, the mighty Mississippi River. Before the coming of I-57, which connected the whole state of Illinois from Chicago to Cairo, the state roads, as they were known, were how everyone got around. Although getting from here to there was undeniably slower, there was a certain beauty to the whole Southern Illinois landscape that travelers completely missed in their mad rush to and from wherever. Lyla Flay, living as she did in St. Louis, had made the trip many times, both ways, fulfilling the old adage that what goes down must come up. She was currently going down Highway 51, southbound, sitting in the passenger seat of a rather nondescript, dark gray, old looking '93 Ford pickup with all new parts. The truck was registered to one Calvin Bonner, known to his employers as Tupelo Jones, but we'll get to that later. His driver's license listed him as a resident of the great state of Indiana, which he was, sort of, currently maintaining a residence in Indianapolis. He was most certainly, though, from Mississippi, hailing from Tupelo, hence that connection explained.

He and Lyla had developed a very close connection built on a foundational commonality. It was near dusk on a summer evening and Lyla had her feet propped up on the dashboard, the window down, playing air guitar and singing Runaway by Del Shannon for everything she was worth. She was a beautiful woman, in her prime. In the 60's Lyla would have expressed as a full-fledged hippy. Calvin was fond of saying he knew her for five years before she owned a bra. Lyla was not so much stunning as unique. Her fine jawline and hazel complexion blended exquisitely together into an initial presentation not easily forgotten. Long auburn hair fell halfway down her back, highlighting its owner's sleek torso. At the age of 33, Lyla had accomplished more in her few years than most do in an entire lifetime. She had grown up in the small town of Wood River, Illinois, just a hop, skip, and jump from St. Louis. Her father, McKenzie Flay, a tall man with a beard, had worked his way up through hard work and perseverance to become the sole owner and proprietor of Flay Foundry, Inc. which employed 283 ironworkers, welders, and other skilled tradesmen in the manufacture of iron castings for General Motors, Lockheed, and just about any major company dealing in transportation. Flay made more money than God but before doing it, having recently graduated from Purdue University with his mechanical engineering degree, he managed to somehow convince Madonna Kohler, a tall, fabulous looking brunette from Milwaukee who had, herself, just graduated from Marquette, to marry him despite his dowry, which she, being of those Kohler's, was not likely to miss. After a few years of seasoning,

young Flay bought out a struggling manufacturing company with his wife's money and turned it into a fortune.

Lyla took full advantage of the life she was born to and one day, in her 22nd year, graduated Magna Cum Laude from Washington University, St. Louis, with a dual degree in business and law. After learning the ropes of investment banking at the Bank of St. Louis under the watchful tutelage of her father's friend Minton Ford, Lyla formed her own venture fund in 2014, appropriately titled The Siren Fund, and rode out the great recovery. "Being lucky takes a lot of hard work," she liked to say. In reality, she was a member of a family that had mastered the art form. By 2019 Lyla was in the chips.

Calvin, on the other side of the social equation, had been born one step above poverty. Other than the unrelenting physical labor, his first 18 years were typical of a boy growing up poor in the industrial Midwest. Dad was a drinker, but not a beater. The old man worked hard to put food on the table, and mostly succeeded. When he died unexpectedly, though, at the ripe old age of 45, things changed.

Calvin, the youngest of four children, went to work alongside his two brothers and sister. Mom stopped being a full-time mom and went with them. Between the five, ends were met, bills were paid, and life went on. When Calvin wasn't working, he was training for whichever sport was in season. One day that strategy produced results. His ability to outrun cornerbacks proved productive. Seeing as how he was fast, strong from all that manual labor, and could catch a football, the 6'2" 195-pound wide receiver became the first member of his family to go to and graduate from college. At the age of 22, Calvin left the University of Mississippi, and the state, degree in hand, and enlisted in the United States Army. After basic at Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri, Calvin went to OCS at Ft. Benning, GA, became a Second Lieutenant, went to Ranger school, somehow made it through, and shortly thereafter deployed to Afghanistan. He went back two more times, the army always had room for anyone as proficient at snooping; they call it long range recon, and sniping; they call it marksmanship. To Calvin, it was just killing, and for him, that is where it started. After three tours, Captain Calvin Bonner came home for good, left the Army, and went to work as a civilian, if that's what you call BlackIce. In any event, his was not a typical career path. One fine day, three years down the road and well into his second career, Calvin Bonner met Lyla Flay at a fundraiser for rescued dogs. They started talking and soon discovered, each in their own way, a fellow traveler, a kindred spirit from a different world. After an afternoon of conversation, whiskey and scotch, coupled with lots of staring, they adopted Hunter, a three-year-old Blood Hound mix, and went home together. For the next two days they battled, cajoled, and discovered their own Holy Grail. The sex was unbelievable, and when combined with self-exploration unlike anything they had ever experienced, a bond was established. In this life, it was a bond they vowed to never break.

At this particular moment the valuable cargo they were transporting was formerly known as Malik Madrod, investment banker and hedge fund genius extraordinaire whose considerable

energy had been spent largely in the destruction of life, people's lives that is, whose sole misfortune was to be employed by a company who actually cared about them. These companies and their executives were prime hunting grounds for hedge fund mercenaries like Madrod and his idols, men like Boone Pickens.

"What kind of man, Cal, would revel in costing 10,000 families their jobs, homes, and livelihoods just to enrich himself?" asked Lyla, interrupting her solo performance momentarily.

"The man in the trunk," replied Calvin Bonner coolly, with not a trace of emotion.

"Ah, yes, him," said Lyla, never missing a beat.

Marod had also been, past tense, a major force in Moranda Corporation, one of the world's largest agricultural companies. A seed and fertilizer giant, a polluter beyond description, Moranda, with Marod's help, had bankrupted and ruined countless smaller companies in their unrelenting desire to lead the market in share and earnings. They were also responsible for the extinction of millions and millions of bees and monarch butterflies. The man had been high on Lyla's list for several years, but it wasn't until recently that she had conceived an absolutely infallible plan to end this vermin's life.

The man wanted her. Badly. So desperately, in fact, that he violated his own rules of engagement just to get her naked, on her back. He met her in a remote area, which Lyla knew quite well. Their tryst was filmed and documented to standards required for Hollywood short documentaries utilizing a rental car that had been secured and set up for just this purpose, by one of Calvin's associates, who merely effected the delivery. The man never met Calvin or knew who he was. Just working for money.

Lyla took it from there and sold him short, as the man had done to many an unsuspecting victim, rendering him unconscious with a shot of Thallium before draining him dry and cutting him into sixteen pieces that completely filled two industrial waste bags. Those very same bags were now bouncing along in the rear of the old Ford pickup. It is fair to say Malik was not playing air guitar or listening to 'Runaway.'

Chapter 2

Ole Black Bottom

Night was coming on fast but hell, out here near the mighty Mississippi, that applied to the shank end of most fall days. The temperature was starting to cool as the old pickup moved steadily down Highway 51. Lyla and Calvin; she called him Cal except when she was livid, were multitasking as they moved along with purpose and clear intent, carefully observing the speed limit while monitoring the various ordinary looking gauges on the dashboard. The old pickup was a fully equipped Ai machine with an advanced police scanner disguised as Navigation.

There was more.

The loving couple was headed towards Ware, a small burg hard by the river's edge, just a hole in the wall which sat adjacent to their destination, an out of the way haven for serious duck hunters, and the bravest of the brave night fisherman, known by the locals as the Black Bottom Slough. To Lyla it was more than a wildfire sanctuary, the slough was a depository. You see, Lyla Flay, a young woman searching for life's meaning, had found hers. She saw her mission as one centered around saving and protecting. It was a diverse sortie. One day it could be animals, the next polluters of the environment. People who were harming others, animals or nature, needed to avoid contact with Lyla who operated at the right end of the moral spectrum.

The fact is, there wasn't a clear handle on Lyla. She had money and status which was visible to those that worked with her but was a puzzle to most, who would admit in their private moments that they did not know her at all, which was probably a good thing. She was a young lady in search of a purpose, and Tupelo could say without straining that she had found it. A life full of meaning, one that mattered, made a difference, had come her way. She was satisfying herself regularly, being fulfilled, getting what she wanted. Her direction was set.

Lyla Flay, born into privilege, had morphed from a semi-normal adolescent who fixated on The Rocky Horror movie, hung out, and had an occasional fling, into a full blown, highly motivated venture capitalist, focused on startups that had a positive impact on the world around them. She was also a serial killer with several notches on her belt. If Lyla came to believe you were abusing Mother Nature in a harmful way, then your life expectancy was subject to recalculation. Her transition had not always been choreographed properly but along the way of life Lyla connected with her Chi in a powerful way, and that was before she met Cal.

At 5'4", weighing in at a buck 10 soaking wet, Lyla's highly tuned body was two decades into the martial arts discipline of Muay Thai. She could drop a grown man in a heartbeat using a precise series of moves involving her knees, elbows, hands, and feet to deliver bone crushing strikes. The discipline's foundation rested upon eight points of contact and Lyla had mastered them all.

Known as "The Art of Eight Limbs" Muay Thai had originated in Thailand, her mother's adopted country. Her mom had been there on several occasions, lifetime, and several times before meeting McKenzie, her dad, she'd been over there with the Peace Corp during summers away from boarding school. Lyla stopped wondering a long time ago why she wasn't taller, and whiter? Both her parents were tall, and very white, but not her. Go figure. It was all a blessing, these physical gifts of hers, the naturally tanned complexion, however you looked at it, and men did, look at it. They surely did. Lyla realized early on that no one in that state of mind can be thinking clearly. It was a moment to remember, a tool to be used. Sometimes she doubted, who doesn't. Her only negative, from her perspective, was living in an America infatuated with tits. She was on the minus side of that equation, presenting more as a young boy. Lyla occasionally regretted the lack of curvature but then, well, she'd have to carry them around and that was extra baggage she didn't need, given her predilection for violence.

It didn't hurt that Cal liked her just the way she was, preferred it actually. That thought was running through her singing self when she felt the truck slow.

"Where are we baby?" she asked, coming back from her daydream.

"Southbound and down sweet girl," Cal said in that slow southern drawl she adored.

"How far southbound baby?" Lyla was asking for clarification, you had to know her to appreciate the value of her inquiry.

"Oh," answered Cal, peering through the fog that was creeping up from the big river 300 yards west of their current position, "I'd say somewhere near Grand Tower."

"Yeah," said Lyla, putting down her guitar, "We still gotta ways to go."

"Roger that," replied Cal, never taking his eyes off the small portion of winding road that he could actually see. He turned his headlights onto low beam. "That's a little better," he said, still looking straight ahead.

"We picked a perfect time," said Lyla, adjusting her slim frame into a more upright and locked position.

"Rock on," said Cal.

45 miles an hour will get you somewhere, just not quickly. The fog continued to increase in volume and density. Fortunately, they had been this way many times and knew the unseen landscape and its many variables.

Sometime in the near hereafter they passed Wolf Lake. Then Pine Hills Road flashed by. Fifteen minutes later Ware popped into view and faded just as quickly as the old Chevy passed through the town of 3,422 souls. A sign informed them they were entering the Union County Conservation Area and just like that their exit appeared like a ghost ship in the night, exiting stage left. They took the gravel road and were soon immersed inside a wooded refuge created in the depression days of the WPA and CCC for the weary ducks and geese that had followed their ancestors south, thousands of miles from the Horicon Refuge and other Canadian summer destinations, since time immemorial. The whole area was swampy. Woodlands mixed with part flooded timber and sections of open water, some with small islands, where hunters had great views of the airways leading into the swamp from the Mississippi and beyond. In the very back end of the refuge was a duck sanctuary like none other, so difficult to get to that even local hunters with intimate knowledge of the area routinely took a pass.

Everyone referred to this special spot as The Black Bottom Slough.

Those that tried to describe it routinely referred to the no more than 2-mile square area as resembling a giant's shithole. Water mixed with decaying wood and god knows what else stunk and coagulated around every wader that set foot into its mess. There were beaver runs underfoot, and falling into one of those in the winter, with some fools carrying loaded shotguns, had resulted in several fatalities over the years. It was like stepping off a cliff into quicksand. The muddy bottom coupled with water so brown as to defy description made visibility impossible. Reaching down into the abyss for a submerged hunter in possession of a loaded shotgun, well, you get the drift.

There was, however, a way in, known only to a few, and most of them were dead. One of those was Lyla Flays grandfather, Woodrow, an avid woodsman whose father had been one those fortunate enough to earn a dollar a day courtesy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in her mind, one of the greatest presidents who ever lived. FDR had built these parks, roads, wildlife areas, anything to keep the men of Southern Illinois and Eastern Missouri from starving during the Great Depression of 1933.

Grandpa Woody, her affectionate nickname for him that stuck, and Lyla had a regular date with the slough every November. Woodrow considered hunting and fishing a sacred duty and Lyla was included whenever time would allow. The girl loved Nature and could see its power from an early age. She felt a certain calm out here in the Limberlost, surrounded by everything alive and growing. "Nature has no predetermined outcomes," Grandpa liked to say. Lyla became a believer.

The lost way to Duckville was a submerged road that had been built to carry in supplies, food for the workers, and machinery. To find the road you first had to locate the fence line that ran alongside its northern border. Most of it was now submerged. The water on the north side of the road, which ran east and west, was shallow and offered the only point of entry to the road surface that lay beneath, unless swimming in shit was your preferred activity. A certain fence post with a W carved into the wood where the third wire strand was attached was the key. Lyla first saw that post more than 20 years ago. Time had rotted the original, but in Lyla's mind's eye that rotted W might as well have been neon. She knew exactly where to go, and how to get there.

Cal pulled the truck off the gravel connector road, got out, locked the truck, put on his waders and pulled two plastic sacks from the pickup's bed, handed one over to Lyla, who also had geared up. She shouldered the load and began walking point. The fence line was approximately 100 yards across an open field than ran into old growth woodlands. She found the entry point in short order, climbed over, her sack in tow, and walked east. One half mile later the roadbed deepened considerably as they approached the small 7-acre lake lying in the slough's center. Lyla pulled out her night finder scope and scoured the ridgeline that ran parallel to the sloughs eastern edge. Nothing. A precaution taken is a calamity avoided was Cal's adage and Lyla was invested. The Mississippi Bluff Ranger District 521 stood a few miles away, east of Ole Black Bottom, towards Jonesboro. Most of the three-man crew had done their share of night recon but poaching season wasn't exactly in session. It would come later, in December, when the big flocks arrived. Nonetheless, taking chances usually was followed, at some point, by disaster. Being thorough just took a moment.

Moving carefully around the scrub which lined the south side of the lake where walking was treacherous but possible, Lyla and Cal reached the end of the tree line. Cal took out his trusty buck knife and cut a one foot slit in each bag. Then, with his best hammer throw technique, he launched the sacks, one by one, into the fetid water, watching each float momentarily before gradually sinking.

Winter was coming, the water was cold, somewhere around 40 degrees. The sodden mass of putrid decay made it easy to miss the ripples where the sacks had descended, if you were looking, which Lyla and Cal were not.

Chapter 3

Preacher Man

The Right Reverend Winkley Barren, spelled with an e which he rued, to put it mildly, was a man whose life was a constantly evolving Arab Spring, which meant it was full of conflict, tension, and shortened life expectancies. Upheaval and uncertainty seemed to be his constant companion. There were days when Winkley felt defiled. God was certainly testing him, how else could all this be explained. After all, his world was grounded in predestination. The Lord's will would be done but only the Lord knew the baby steps. Maybe God would take him into his warm embrace one day and everything would be explained, or not. He certainly wanted forgiveness for his transgressions, his weakness, but like those infamous TV celebrities who had blazed the trail he now walked, he did not want to quit. God would tell him when, and so far, he hadn't heard a word.

Parking his old Land Cruiser in the gravel lot that served the Church of Apostolic Openness, Winkley walked briskly towards his office in the old church's west end. Built in 1933, during the Great Depression, the only church in Ware, Illinois, was home to 53 hardened souls for whom the second coming would be more than a resurrection. Primarily an older group of aging Boomers, they had persisted in living out their days in and around the small town for a variety of reasons that only they knew. The meager salary that flowed from the Sunday offering plates into Winkley's pockets would have discouraged many a traveler, but not Winkley, who was humming his favorite hymn as he turned the key in the latch and open the door to his palace.

"I long to see the face of God, to walk the streets where angels trod, just get me there and I'll be fine, let me be the last in line." There was that, but we'll get to it soon enough. Winkley let a hard fart, powerful enough to stain the porthole, bypassed his office and headed straight for the privy. Afterwards, he wondered how he had made it all the way from the slough, where he had gone this early morning, to make a deposit, to the church, where he had made another. God was kind, most of the time.

Winkley Barren, all 5'6" of him, small and slight of build, considered himself to be a very fortunate man. After being excommunicated from the US Army for conduct unbecoming he had thought long and hard about his life and career path. Having barely made it out of Anna-Jonesboro public schools, the options, he felt, were less than promising. He had spent three years contemplating his future before enlisting in the United States Army.

At age 21 that decision was a dive into the furthest reaches of oblivion. Constantly set upon due to his diminutive size, lack of motor skills and defensive capacity, Winkley became the prey of larger animals.

When something went wrong with the vast collection of fuckups that constituted the personnel pool of the volunteer army, he was the easiest bait, continually blamed as the reason why goal setting had reached an all-time low.

Just before being sent home, however, a profound event changed Winkley's life. Actually, there were two events.

Discouraged beyond repair, Winkley staggered into the local vestibule of Ft. Benning's on base religious center and to his amazement found an assortment of other lost souls queued up and searching, for something. While he did not exactly commit to the Lord Jesus Christ at that moment in time, Winkley watched with rapt attention every move of the rotating pastor on call for that day's proceedings. The message, the call to salvation, the whole body of this business was fascinating. Winkley couldn't help thinking someone had to be the bearer of good tidings. It could be him. He could do this job. The flock must be fed, and he decided right then and there to provide the trough.

Before he could activate his plan, a seminal moment intervened. B-4-2, his basic training company, was like most social groups or societies in that there was a rigid structure, a hierarchy if you will, that started with the Drill Sergeant and ended with the bottom feeders like Winkley. He was not a discipline problem, hell, you would scarcely notice the slight young man, all 145 pounds of him dripping wet. The problem was skills. Winkley had none.

No athletic ability, no speed, certainly not strong enough to pass the PT or qualify on the range. The Army was a process-oriented organization and Winkley's process had no end in sight. He was a nice enough boy who, in their eyes, couldn't defend himself, much less others.

So, in the last few days of his army career, Winkley was routinely dispatched to KP. When he finished washing his pots, others gave him theirs. The yet to be fully accredited troopers also gave him a hard time and on the future minister's last day three of them kidnapped him, drove him kicking and screaming to Sand Hill, where the 75th Ranger Regiment made its home, and threw him clothes and all, into one of the muddy ponds that seemed to be stuck damned near everywhere.

Winkley thrashed and kicked, trying not to drown. He wasn't a very good swimmer. After consuming themselves with laughter, reality dawned on Billy Sampson, leader of the pack, who, seeing the floundering idiot, dove in, shoved Winkley underwater one last time for good measure, and then proceeded to attempt a rescue.

That effort, as well intentioned as it might, or might not have been, was sidetracked by a large contingent of poisonous water moccasins, known also as cottonmouths in some parts of America. Spring had sprung and with it the nasty little babies whose upbringing was disrupted by all the commotion. Without realizing his misfortune, Billy, leaving the scene of the crime, bumped clumsily into a large fallen tree branch, mostly submerged, that happened to be home sweet home to fifty or so of the hatchlings. They descended like the plague on the basic trainee. The two boys who had participated in the abduction started yelling at the top of their lungs which brought a couple Rangers to the rescue. What they pulled out of the water was covered in bite marks, twitching uncontrollably as death approached. A few of the babies were still embedded, giving one last ounce of devotion before being executed.

Winkley had drug himself up the muddy bank just far enough away from the action to get a close-up view while not suffering so much as a scratch. A smile crept upon his face as he saw justice rendered. It was a scene with a climax he never forgot. He got off on it.

Soon after that, with his honorable discharge in hand, Winkley went home on the Greyhound bus and enrolled, online, in a 12-quarter series of religious courses that eventually earned him the title of Minister of Divinity. He shopped around Southern Illinois' smaller towns and after a brief period of self-doubt landed an associate pastors position with the Church of Apostolic Openness. Winkley was home at last. When the Head Pastor suddenly and mysteriously died of an apparent heart attack, he became The Man. And he had become a man, at least more of one. His voice was being heard and he had opinions. A man who had never experienced the love and affection of anyone, including his own mother and father, was now listened to by 54 attentive souls weekly. They gave him their money. One donated a broken Land Rover that another of his parishioners rebuilt from the bottom up. The truck looked like it had experienced a rebirth. Better yet, it was 4-wheel drive. Ten years passed while time stood still.

Barely thirty- five years old, Winkley Barren had a home base from which to operate. He was so out of the mainstream that no oversight existed where his activities were concerned. A man whose philosophy of life was undergoing a continual metamorphosis was not merely under the radar; he was not even on one. To the outside world, he did not exist.

Chapter 4

Home from the Hill

Lincoln Kohler smiled to himself as he propped his long legs up on the old school desk that was still serving its purpose. He had recently acquired it at auction and moved it to Springfield, Illinois, where he was currently assigned to the FBI field office. His Uncle, Cyrus Kohler, the founder and former Chairman of The Front, a still growing major third party in America who called themselves The Unbought, had an old desk that was almost identical. He had tried unsuccessfully to pry the old man loose from it, to no avail. Being the next best alternative would do nicely, he reasoned, and sunk a little deeper into an ageing leather chair whose height control arm was frozen permanently into what amounted to a perfect setting for a tall man. Being 6'3" qualified Lincoln for long term ownership of such a chair.

Like his Uncle Cyrus before him, Lincoln had served his country as an Army Ranger, a member of The Band of Brothers, otherwise known as the 2/506th infantry brigade, a part of the 75th Ranger Regiment from Ft. Benning, GA. Cyrus, who had fought with Captain Fred Spaulding and Colonel Benjamin Harrison at Ripcord, America's last major battle of the Vietnam War in 1970, was still kicking, having retired from SIUC and The Front, almost. His handpicked successor, General Lionel Rand, beloved by a large contingent of Americans, was currently beginning his 2024 run for the office of The Presidency. The Front was the party in the middle of two tribes gone mad. They were a party of reason and science in a world where there often was none. Their mediation of the pettiness and corruption that had preceded them was growing. The Front had no PACS, no lobbyists, no predetermined beneficiaries of largesse. Anyone could join The Front for \$1 or give anything their heart desired, as long as it was fully disclosed, and they were a member. No corporation could be a donor. They were beholden to no one and had, at last count, 82 million members who had defected in droves from the Democrat and Republican parties.

Lincoln had traveled a different route than his uncle before him. After high school in River City he had enlisted in the Army, gone to OCS, heard the siren call of the Ranger life, done his 61 days, been deployed three times, and come home alive. After the last, stationed in the Kandahar province of Afghanistan, it was time to go. Captain Lincoln Kohler came home, went to college at Washington University in St. Louis, played on the basketball team while he majored in criminal justice. Upon graduation the FBI came calling and now, three years into his employment, he had been promoted to field investigator, southern district of Illinois under the tutelage of Wayne Throgmartin, a friend of his Uncle Cyrus. Wayne, it turned out, was himself a former special forces operative. Lincoln had become a field lieutenant all over again.

Wayne had been the lead investigator on the LaRue Arnold case. Arnold, a Republican, had been a long serving member of the US House of Representatives. His acrimonious relationship with the now deceased former Senator Ray Malencia, who had also been Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, was well documented. Arnold had the misconceived idea that his favorite party, a certain professional hooker named Lenora Hemmings, whose clientele consisted mainly of professional politicians who knew her as Lena, was his alone. The relationship between the two men spiraled out of control. LaRue came up with the bright idea of fixing Malencia's permanent erection for Lena by slipping him a non-traceable mickey in the form of an exotic poison.

Aconitum, also known as Wolfsbane, is a very potent poison that dissipates quickly after ingestion, becoming untraceable in the human body. Arnold had property located in Frankfort, Kentucky, whose acreage bordered the Kentucky River. The man loved flowers and grew a wide variety of colorful varieties, including what appeared to be a beautiful purple flowering orchid which in reality was an outlier. The bees wouldn't touch it and Wayne's investigator, a certain Tommy Black Lance Wanderone, a full-blooded Cherokee and friend of Cyrus, put it together. After that it was all downhill for LaRue who currently was serving 25-50 in Marion, Illinois' Max-Security facility. Wayne, a war vet himself, got himself promoted to Midwest Regional Command in Chicago and slotted Lincoln into his old job as agent-in-charge of the entire southern district which extended from Springfield to Cairo, Illinois.

"Welcome, to the machine," said Ally Beliles. She was one of Lincoln's two field investigators, the other being Rudolph Henry, a tall black man who grew up in Selma, Alabama. He liked to remind people that there was only one bridge in Selma.

Ally had come to the FBI by way of Southwest Missouri State Teachers College in Springfield, Missouri, now called Missouri State, where she had excelled at softball and mixed martial arts. She was also a former Marine with two combat tours under her belt. The first time Lincoln met her, when introductions were taking place, he identified her as a legitimate bad ass. She could probably bench press him, he reasoned. Although Ally was only 5'6", her 140-pound body was tuned up. Slim, boyish looking, with a short bob haircut, Ally was someone you could remember. Her blue eyes were crystalline, unsettling. She was efficient. Lincoln liked that in a person.

"Thanks, Ally," Lincoln replied. "Did I say that right?" He did not want to piss her off day one.

"Yes sir, absolutely," she said, rounding the corner of his desk and settling in behind her workstation. "Like in Alley," she said, "Easy to remember, hard to forget."

She held him with that gaze for a moment, then turned, picked up her notebook and redirected.

“Got a minute boss,” she said. “yeah, what’a ya need?” asked Lincoln.

“Well, I’ve come across some data that’s hard to miss if you’re looking, or even if you aren’t, I suppose,” she said.

“What’s hard to miss?” asked Lincoln, pulling his lanky frame into an upright position.

“These,” she replied, holding up her notebook and swiveling around so he could get a clear glimpse of the screen.

It was a list of about 20 names, or so it seemed. Actually, it was 16. Lincoln scanned the page top to bottom.

“What is it exactly? He asked. “Missing persons, some go back ten years,” said Ally.

“Everyone of them in our jurisdiction,” Lincoln said, as he slowly scanned the list.

“Yep,” said Ally, gone missing, last known whereabouts,” her voice trailed off.

“All over the place,” said Lincoln, bending over to get a closer view.

“Look at this,” he said, “This guy, Malod Marod, remember him?”

“That’s a recent,” he said.

“Oh yeah, he was under fire for years, and in denial,” said Ally.

“Steel, wasn’t it, forging operations?”

“Well, not exactly,” said Ally, “ He was a hedger, you know, one of those suits ripping people off and liking it. The big cahuna, though, was the millions this company gave Arnold, Malencia, and their fellow legislators to sidestep air quality issues for Moranda Corp. Malod went on 60 Minutes....”

“Yeah, yeah. Now it’s coming back,” said Lincoln.

“One day, he just went missing,” said Ally, and he never came back, never showed up for work, nada.”

“What else is on that list?” asked Lincoln.

“Lots of kids, mainly boys,” said Ally.

Where,” asked Lincoln, was their last known location?”

“Hard to say, to be accurate and all,” replied Ally, but there was one constant.”

“Yeah, go on,” said Lincoln.

“They were all last seen over by the river, the Mississippi, south of Chester, can’t say if they were coming or going,” her voice trailed off and went silent.

“There’s some lonely ole stretches of blacktop over there,” said Lincoln.

“Not a whole lot of people either,” Ally said, pulling out a map of Southern Illinois and laying it on the top of Lincoln’s desk.

“Pretty convenient out there in nowhere to do whatever suits your fancy,” said Lincoln.

“Like murder, rape, abduction,” Ally replied.

“Right, that is an absolute possibility,” Lincoln replied, staring down at the little towns dotting highway 3 as it meandered southward from Chester to Cairo.

“Let’s get a profile started on the missing persons. Let’s find out more about them, where they call home, if any, and talk to anyone who knew them, might have an idea where they went, that sort of thing.”

“Right boss,” said Ally, swiveling in her chair while simultaneously turning on her computer. Just then the phone rang. Ally picked it up and mumbled something unintelligible before punching hold.

“It’s for you boss,” she said.

Lincoln picked up the phone and immediately recognized the voice on the other end.

“Uncle Cyrus,” he said, a wide smile covering his face, “haven’t heard from you in a while. You been laying low, dodging reporters, all that,”.

“I’ve been taking a little time off,” came the reply, “Jax and I retired last year and bought us a little spot near Sanibel. I guess you could call it a glorified trailer. My good friend Jim Wilson talked me into it. Tommy and Duster came down. We have two other bedrooms in the doublewide. Those boys stayed almost two weeks. Bought a lot of groceries and caught plenty of fish which we promptly turned into meals. We’d been there a month before burning out. We all drove home together in the old Beemer.

“You still got that thing?” asked Lincoln

“Absolutely,” replied Cyrus, “I am going to die with the Goose.” He often referred to the old BMW as the “Blue Goose.”

“The Front consumes everything. Ever since we became a full-fledged party it has taken on a life of its own. I also have to look out for Lionel occasionally, although he would spit a brick if he heard me say anything that suggested assistance. Say, why don’t you come down next week for our annual fall cookout. It would be a good time for you to meet Duster, Tommy, and the rest of the crew, as we like to call them. Lionel might even be here.”

“Make it so,” replied Lincoln, recalling an old phrase from his Ranger days.

“Roger that,” said Cyrus, acknowledging the past in his life as well, “See you then.”

He disconnected, leaving Lincoln with his thoughts.