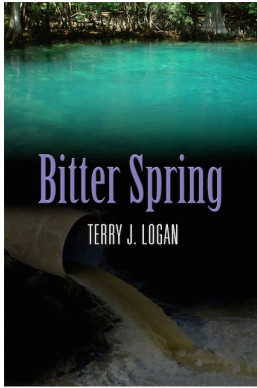


A photograph of a body of water with a concrete pipe discharging into it. The water is a vibrant turquoise color, and the background shows a dense forest of trees. The pipe is concrete and is discharging a large volume of water, creating a white, foamy splash at the point of entry. The text "Bitter Spring" is overlaid in a large, purple, serif font, and "TERRY J. LOGAN" is overlaid in a smaller, white, sans-serif font below it.

Bitter Spring

TERRY J. LOGAN



The book is set in Southwest Florida and tells how a retired geology professor, Peter Matthews, discovers a link between abandoned phosphate mines in the area and chemical contamination of a number of freshwater springs. He further discovers, with the help of an epidemiologist from The University of Florida, Dr. Samantha Baer, that people living in the vicinity of the springs are getting cancer at an unusually high rate. Matthews enlists the help of his neighbor, Max Hand, a retired Marine Gunnery Sergeant. They live in the small fishing village of Cortez in Manatee County. Max provides the beef Matthews needs when Peter discovers that the mines are being used to inject toxic wastes in the groundwater.

Bitter Spring

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Your free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!

Bitter Spring

Terry J. Logan

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Chapter 1

I was woken in the early morning by two of the things I love most: the Florida sun pouring through the window in my bedroom and the wet tongue of my German Shepherd bitch, Asa, slobbering my face. My name is Peter Matthews and, like most Floridians of a certain age, I escaped the drear and staidness of the north for the sun, craziness, and hope of the Sunshine State.

I was born in St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands and grew up believing that everyone lived in paradise and only wore shorts and tee shirts, if that. My father was manager of a small factory on the Caribbean side of the island and my mother cared for me, their only child, which turned out to be a full-time job. I was confusion to them. I was smart enough to breeze through all the courses the Jesuits threw at me, but I was an outdoors person, still am. I rode my bike all over the island with my native friends, swam in the waves, learned to surf badly and, after I was fifteen, figured out how to get served in the local, non-tourist bars. Cruzan rum, the local product, was not bad, but I would learn later that all of the Caribbean countries claimed to have the best.

When I was seventeen and ready to graduate, my mother and father, the good parents that they were, insisted that I attend the University of Miami and major in business, like my father had. I asked them if they were serious and had paid any attention to my life style. Of course they were serious. Anyway, after much fighting, they permitted me to attend North Carolina State University to study geology. My father had met a geologist once and was persuaded that his son, if he graduated, might be able to earn a living. Plus, the tuition was much less than at Miami.

Raleigh, North Carolina was fucking cold in the winter and it was considered part of the south! Anyway, I learned to wear more clothes and actually enjoyed long runs in the crisp mornings through the pinewoods, the carpet of needles cushioning my footsteps and the scent like the potpourri my mother kept on her bureau. I loved geology. It just made sense. I had done well in chemistry and physics in Jesuit school and I quickly learned that geology was just the natural manifestation of those fundamental sciences. Biology too, but I was not a bug and plant guy.

I graduated with honors and decided to add climatological insult to injury by pursuing graduate work at the University of Idaho. Not only was it much colder there – they claimed to have two months of summer, but not the summer I knew – but the place was rife with Mormons who did not understand the physiological benefits of drinking. I had actually been offered fellowships to Berkeley and The University of Arizona but turned them down to work with one of the preeminent hard rock geology scholars in the world.

I have to back up and make a confession, something that has virtually controlled my life from high school to the present. I fucking love women! Or is it the other way around? Anyway, they have been a source of infinite pleasure and infinite pain. I am

very superficial when it comes to women and that has been my downfall. Mine are all blond, petite, mindless, but with the will power of some ancient Amazon. At some point they discover my shallow intentions towards them and they leave, but not before extracting as much loot as possible.

I am not particularly handsome, a little over six feet tall and rangy from running and swimming, nondescript hair worn short, and hazel eyes. I am mister ordinary, but I believe women like me for my sparkling personality. In other words, I pay attention to them when most men are absorbed with themselves and their hand-held toys.

My first wife, Cathy, was the only child of Montana ranchers and spoiled as hell; not by me – I couldn't afford it. The problem with the marriage was - and it was my fault - I was more in love with my studies than with her. She was great in the sack but that was it. Anyway, she finally figured it out and split, went back home with all the nice new stuff her parents had furnished our campus apartment with.

My second wife, Susan, was like the first but a little older and a little more mature. I said a little, not a lot, but more mature than I was. She was the one I came the closest to actually loving, more than just the sex. She was drop dead gorgeous and an aspiring anchorwoman on the local TV station in Knoxville, Tennessee, where I had taken a job as Assistant Professor in the Geology Department. She lasted the longest but the end came when I refused to have kids and she wanted to have some before they permanently ruined her figure and her future.

My third wife was the biggest disaster of all, but that's a story for another day.

I finally rolled out of bed when Asa stopped licking my face and started digging into my ribs with her nose. Bitch! I opened the screen door at the back of the house to let her out and went into the kitchen to refill her water bowl and see to her food. It was Monday morning, it was early August and already hot enough to fry eggs on my car hood. I had to be at a job site by ten and I would be gone until after dark. I hated leaving Asa alone for that long – she would tear up the place in a female huff – but fortunately I had a Good Samaritan close by who would look in on her.

Max Hand is my neighbor and only good friend, which is amazing since we have nothing in common except good Scotch. We live in the old fishing village of Cortez, a small peninsula of land jutting into Sarasota Bay and separated from the Gulf of Mexico by the uber-rich barrier islands of Longboat Key and Anna Maria Key. Cortez is still affordable – just ask Max and me – but the richies from the north are closing in. Matt is sixty-five years old, looks ninety, and is a retired Marine Gunnery Sergeant from Spokane, Washington. Max saw combat towards the end of Vietnam and again in the first Gulf War. Max is divorced (the poor woman!) and generally anti-social. Right of Attila the Hun and a lifelong member of the NRA, Max thinks I'm a Communist. The only things he cares for is his guns and Asa. He is a short, massively built hulk and I have no doubt he could break a man's neck with his bare

hands. He doesn't often get mad, but I once saw him clear a bar on Anna Maria with a pool cue. I stay on his good side.

His house, almost identical to mine, but in much better shape, is separated from mine by a chain-link fence and a gate we always leave open. Max was sitting on his back patio drinking coffee and feeding pieces of sliced apple to Asa. Bitch!

"Hey, good buddy," he said, as I entered his yard to retrieve my dog, "don't you ever feed this creature? It's a good thing you never had kids with those trophy brides of yours. And when are you going to mow that backyard? Don't make me do it or I'll send you a bill you can't afford."

"Gunny, that dog is a pure whore. She has plenty to eat at home but just loves to suck up to you. As for the lawn, I've become the tree hugger you always thought I was and I'm going native. I'm going to transform my backyard into a southern natural landscape. Which to you means it's going to look like shit, but get over it."

I took a seat next to Max, but always a good right hand away from him. I let him fondle that female sleaze I called a dog and drink his coffee.

"Gunny, I'm going to be in the field today and I probably won't get home until after dark. Check in on this worthless piece of German breeding and I'll buy you dinner later."

"Peter, do you ever make any money from these folk, or do you do it just to keep busy?"

"This is a good one, Gunny, and they paid my retainer in advance. I may be able to put outdoor carpet on my patio with my next paycheck."

"How in hell did I ever get a Communist for a neighbor? Don't worry about the dog; I'll take care of her, but don't be surprised some day if she chooses to stay with me. Something to do with taste and responsibility."

Chapter 2

I felt a little abandoned when Asa refused to leave Matt's side. Hell, I bought her the best that Publix had to offer. Maybe I would lose her after all if I didn't spend more time at home. Was she wife number four?

I drive a very sensible Nissan Altima with 125,000 miles on it. It's totally appropriate when I have business on the east side of I-75, but I always feel a little awkward when I try to park it between the Jaguars and Mercedes on Saint Armands Circle. Well, fuck them. At least mine is paid for.

Today, I have an appointment with the most promising client I've found in five years. I was retained by a multi-national corporation to review the reclamation practices at one of their abandoned phosphate mines in central Florida. The state was once the world's leader in phosphate production, but more economical sources in North Africa and in the Pacific had led to a decline in the Florida market. Producing commercial phosphate from the raw ore was a messy process and resulted in as much waste as the product itself. In a nutshell, you mine the ore, which in Florida was virtually at the surface, dissolve it in sulfuric acid, evaporate the acid solution to precipitate calcium phosphate, your product, and dump the residue, calcium sulfate (commonly known as gypsum), into large retaining ponds. Well, once the mines are no longer producing, the parent companies are faced with a nasty dilemma: what to do with the mine waste? Well, that mine waste, described in the industry as phospho-gypsum, has no economic value. So, the parent companies just leave the vast piles where they are. But, this is Florida, which, in the central part of the state, gets about fifty inches of rain a year. So, all of that rainfall accumulates in the lagoons holding the waste and the water interacts with the waste to produce some nasty stuff you wouldn't want to swim in, bathe in, or drink.

The mine I was visiting was about thirty miles east of I-75, the universal geographical reference for everyone in southwest Florida (only the less favored live on the east side), and about ten miles north of the Little Manatee River that winds its way slowly to Tampa Bay. It's a pretty remote area, except for the ubiquitous trailer homes and an occasional crossroads with a gas station and convenience store.

The mine in question had applied about five years ago for a permit from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) for a series of injection wells that were to be used for disposal of treated wastewater from the gypsum ponds. The idea was that the most contaminated water would be injected at depths way below the geologic strata from which drinking water was pumped. Less contaminated water, almost drinkable, would be injected to shallower depths but still below the drinking water aquifer. That aquifer, the Floridian, supplied drinking water to large populations in southern South Carolina and Georgia, and much of Florida. As a geologist, it had been my job to support the mining company in convincing FDEP that the proposed plan was safe. I had researched geological records for the area

around the mine and was comfortable with the proposed disposal. The operating permit had been granted and the shallower wells had been installed and operating for about four years. Today, I would be observing drilling of the last of the wells and I would be meeting at the site with a representative of FDEP.

Jason Flowers was the SW FDEP water quality specialist. His office was in Temple Terrace, a Tampa suburb. Jason was in his mid-thirties, a third generation Floridian, born and raised on a small farm near Plant City. He had a degree in Soil and Water Science from the University of Florida and had joined FDEP as a summer intern in his senior year. His responsibilities included water quality of regional groundwater and the several springs in his jurisdiction. He was also assigned oversight of water quality at abandoned phosphate mines in Manatee County.

The North Manatee Phosphate Mine Company was owned by a Canadian mining conglomerate with holdings in Florida, North Carolina and western Canada. Their Florida mines were all closed and the parent company was trying to minimize the costs of cleaning up their properties that were now a liability rather than an asset. I got the distinct impression that the local managers had been given orders to cut costs as much as possible and stonewall FDEP wherever they could. I had refused to go along and I anticipated the day they would no longer need my services.

I entered the main gate and headed to the cluster of buildings that was the mine's original offices. I saw the white Chevy Blazer with the FDEP logo on its side. Jason would be inside questioning the site manager, Barry Delgado, and Barry would be waiting for my sorry ass to show up and rescue him. Barry had no technical background, was a Manatee County native, and had worked at the mine when it was still active. Now he was the caretaker with a minimal crew and took his orders directly from Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

"Barry, Jason, sorry to keep you waiting. My maid was a little late this morning and I had to wait for her to mind my extremely expensive pedigreed dog. You know how it is with us folks on the Gulf."

The two men laughed. Consultants get no respect – we're looked upon as hired whores only. That was fine with me as long as I got paid well and regularly.

Barry waved me to a chair near a worktable where he and Jason were poring over maps and design plans.

"I was going over with Jason our progress on the injection wells. After that, we'll go out to the site and inspect the work. The shallower wells that were drilled and cased four years ago have been operating without problem. The trickiest work yet to be completed are the deep wells. Based on your analyses, Peter, and confirmed by Jason and FDEP, they should be at least 100 feet below the Floridian aquifer and in a confined layer. One of the things you'll see today is the core samples we took at each

depth as we drilled. They just look like rocks to me, but I'm sure you guys will understand them better."

Barry got hard hats for us and we followed him to his Chevy Silverado king cab. Encrusted with caked mud and covered in dust, it was definitely a working vehicle. The mine encompasses about four hundred acres –it's one of the smaller ones in south-central Florida. We skirted the mined out area. It was about fifty feet below the land surface and there were small pools of rainwater everywhere. Barry had pointed out on my first visit that the mined area did not pose a significant environmental threat. Trace elements like cadmium were still locked up in the phosphate ore and would not contaminate the groundwater. The big problem was the phospho-gypsum holding ponds. The gypsum deposits were acidic and all sorts of contaminants had been released in the ore processing. The gypsum heaps were contained within earthen berms along with accumulated rainfall; that was the main problem. These waste lagoons were extensive, representing almost fifty percent of the mine's total area. The company had determined, through a detailed study by the Chemical Engineering Department at The University of Georgia, that storm water in the oldest gypsum ponds had less contamination than in the most recent ones. In the interest of saving money, water in the oldest ponds was treated with standard acid neutralization and filtration and then injected into the shallowest wells. I had helped the company convince FDEP that this was satisfactory and safe. The cost of treating the most contaminated wastewater was prohibitive and so the company had settled on a plan to use partial treatment and deep well injection.

We started with one of the older lagoons and Barry pointed out the treatment facility and the pipe leading from it to the injection equipment that consisted of a positive displacement pump and an injection port into the well casing. The pump was running and Barry indicated on the control panel that it was maintaining a steady rate of 300 gallons per hour. "This is not fast," he said, "but we've got time on our hands. We have the environmental liability for this site forever. My bosses don't like it, but that's the way it is."

We visited two more of the active pumping stations on the older lagoons. Both were pumping treated wastewater at about the same rate. Barry tried to avoid the last one. "It's the same as the others," he said. It was identical to the others but had a separate shed just in front of the pumping station. The shed was about the size of a two-car garage and made from corrugated galvanized sheeting. A single PVC pipe exited the building and was patched into the injection well pipes. I had been asking about the purpose of the shed for years and always got some bullshit answer, such as, "Don't worry about that, Peter. The company's hotshot scientists are trying out a new way to increase flow into the aquifer. They're trying some new chemicals and they want to keep it quiet. You know how that is – they're looking at a couple of patents and a pay raise." I raised the same question today and got the same answer

"What do you think, Jason?" I asked, hoping the guy would get his face out of his ass. "Have you approved this setup?"

"Yeah, kinda. The company asked to test some new chemicals to increase hydraulic flow in the wells. The MSDS sheets were clean so we let them proceed. The sooner we get rid of the wastewater the better. If these tests will help, I'm, I mean the agency is all for it."

As a scientist, I've learned that when certain bells go off in my head I pay attention to them. I didn't like Barry's comments about the tests, and I liked Jason's even less. Oh well, I thought, that's not what I'm being paid to do, and I like getting those consulting checks every month. But, because I'm a scientist, being a skeptic trumps being a whore. I told myself to keep an eye on this operation.

We made our way to the deep-well injection site near the newest gypsum lagoons. There was a drilling rig on site and a crew of five were manning it, unloading well sections from a flat bed truck and laying out core samples from the most recent drilling. The supervisor, a middle aged man in a wife beater tee shirt, stained jeans and a Marlins cap, approached Barry as we got out of the vehicle. His name was Jesus.

"Jesus," Barry said, looking over the area. "What's the progress on the drilling?"

"Looks good, boss. Your geologist guy got it right. We drilled straight through the Floridian, hit some dense sand and clay below that and now we're working our way through a heavy clay lens. Once we get below that we'll be in a totally confined aquifer. You could put Jimmy Hoffa down there and you would never find him."

"Jesus," I said, using the Spanish pronunciation, "thanks for the vote of confidence. My question is, what kind of flow rate can we expect to get in such a deep well?"

"Good question, doc. The company wants as large a well as possible, but there are limits. My guess is we will be lucky to get 200 gallons per minute. And, plan on the well plugging from time to time. It's going to take years to get rid of all this stuff."

Barry didn't like the way the conversation was going. "Peter, as you know, the company is committed to final reclamation of this site, no matter how long it takes. We're going nowhere until the job is done."

Jason had yet to utter a word and had taken no notes. He acted like a fifth grader on a field trip, clueless but eager and glad to be out of the classroom (his office).

I left him and Barry exchanging pleasantries and headed back, debating stopping for lunch somewhere between the mine and I-75 (good luck with that) or dogging it home to see if my girl (get the pun?) had been adopted by my psychotic best friend. My stomach bet on lunch and won. I was aware of a new cookie cutter development a few miles east of I-75 and just off the road I was taking. Maybe there would be a cookie cutter McDonalds, Subway, or better yet a real restaurant where I could get a

cold beer. The exit said Southern Oaks and I took it. The asphalt road was brand new and cut through the flat central Florida landscape of pine and scrub palmetto. Ahead, the land had been cleared, exposing the red sandy soil of the region, and yellow flags identified building lots. A concrete sewer was being installed in a ditch paralleling the road. Further on, the first finished houses appeared, two-storey, fake Mexican stucco with clay tile roofs and two car garages facing the street. Here and there a late model pickup or SUV was parked in the driveway – the garages had already been taken up with stuff. What's with you people, I thought. Couldn't you have dumped some of that shit when you left?

About a mile further on, the road ended in a small commercial area that had been designed to look like small town America. A small village square, freshly seeded to Bermuda grass, was encircled by a series of connected one-storey buildings. The businesses included a post office, Dollar Store, unisex salon, a yoga studio and a CVS pharmacy. And, a restaurant that billed itself as South Florida Mexican Café. I had no idea what that was, but I guessed they would have Corona beer. Even gringo joints have Corona.

I parked next to the restaurant between a new Ford F1 pickup and a used Subaru station wagon with a bicycle rack in the rear and a canoe mount on the roof. The wagon was plastered with stickers that asked us to save whales, manatees, turtles, and many of God's other creatures. Tree hugger, I thought. Bet I can tell who owns the truck and the hippie wagon.

It was two in the afternoon, a little late for lunch and hours before the evening crowd, assuming this little burg could provide any kind of clientele until the place was built out. I won my bet hands down. The truck owner, a guy in his late thirties, wearing a stained tee shirt, faded jeans, and a Florida Gators cap, was talking up the barely legal girl behind the counter. I picked out the tree hugger by process of elimination (I was a professor once upon a time!). She was in her late twenties, starkly beautiful, although she had made every effort to hide it under a Greenpeace tee shirt, khaki shorts, and flip-flops. Her strawberry blond hair was long and pulled back in a ponytail and a pair of Oakley sunglasses were perched on her head. She was seated at a table in the middle of the room, munching on some kind of grazer food – greens and chopped up vegetables.

I took the small table for two next to hers, acknowledged her with a smile when I sat down and signaled the virgin at the counter that I needed to be fed. I refuse to be kept waiting in restaurants, especially one with only three clients.

I ordered a Corona (told you!) and a chimichanga. The girl brought a small bowl of chips with the beer. Nice! I noticed the tree hugger checking me out. I couldn't decide if she was interested in me for sexual reasons or if she felt I was some kind of hillbilly Florida axe murderer. I tipped my beer bottle in her direction and she forced her attention back to her grazing.

"Were people really meant to eat that stuff?" I asked. I have an endless supply of openers that work about five percent of the time.

"Are you talking to me?"

"I think so. The guy at the bar is eating a hamburger, real food. I'm just trying to make conversation; I'm not hitting on you. You're young enough to be my daughter, if I had one. I just have this thing about eating alone."

The girl nodded and sipped her iced tea. "Sorry. I didn't mean to be rude, but there are a lot of creeps around these parts. Plus, today hasn't been a good one for me."

"Sorry about your day, but even though my friends all think I'm a creep, I'm not your creep. Look, would you mind if I shared your table? You don't have to talk to me, but I would enjoy the company."

The girl nodded and pulled her food and drink onto her side of the table. I moved my stuff over. We watched each other for a moment.

"My name is Peter Matthews. I live on the coast in a small fishing village called Cortez. I'm a geologist and I'm working at the moment for one of the old phosphate mines northeast of here. I'm on my way home, but my stomach insisted I stop to eat. I didn't even know this place existed; I just followed the signs."

My food arrived at that moment and the girl took the opportunity to check me over and think about what I had told her as I bit into the chimichanga and washed it down with the beer.

"My name is Lisa Melvin. You're lucky to have found this place; it's brand new. It's amazing how these developers can throw up this shit in the middle of nowhere and find assholes willing to live here. I envy you living on the coast, I think. I went to Sarasota once. Too many people, too much money, too many northerners; the new Florida I guess. Just not for me."

"Don't bullshit me, Lisa. I hear your accent and you're not a southern cracker. Let me guess: Boston, Philly, Westchester?"

"Boston."

"Aha! I thought so, but what the hell are you doing out here in hillbilly heaven?"

"OK, my family is stinking rich. They insisted I go to Bryn Mawr, where I got a degree in English Literature and made friends with other blue blood women, half of whom were lesbos. What was I supposed to do? Mummy and Daddy felt I should get a job teaching English Literature to another generation of spoilt rich brats at some exclusive prep school and wait for mister right to show up and whisk me off, based

on their approval of course. I would have rather slit my wrists with my expensive Mont Blanc pen."

"Well, Bryn Mawr taught you to be a bleeding heart, granola eating, tree hugger. I saw your bumper stickers. But, what are you doing out here?"

Lisa nodded and sipped her tea. "I finally split with my parents when I wouldn't go along with their plans for me. I wanted to get as far away from Boston as possible. My grandmother had left me a small inheritance and I used it to explore other ways of living. I worked at a summer camp in the Catskills one year and the next at a resort in the mountains of North Carolina, teaching rich people from Atlanta how to canoe and kayak without drowning or ruining their new LL Bean outfits. One of the camp counselors told me about opportunities in Florida to run boating liveries on some of the small freshwater springs in the central part of the state, and here I am. The business is not that profitable – I live in a trailer in Apakola, a small town about two miles from where I work, Central Warm Springs."

"That's a hell of a change from Boston, Lisa," I said, motioning young virgin to bring me another Corona and refill Lisa's iced tea. "How do you live out here? Do you have any friends in your town?"

I think I hit a nerve because, for the first time, I saw the girl without the bravado she had shown me.

"A few, but it's hard to meet people in these small towns. It's not like the coast. Out here you have to be second or third generation before you're accepted. It's hard but I'm working on it."

"I don't mean to pry, Lisa," I said, my normally annoying, in your face voice, slowing to a whisper. "But, I think something else is going on. I don't know you, but I know people need someone to talk to when things go bad. I have nothing else to do. My neighbor is looking after my dog and there is no one else waiting for me. Tell me what's up."

The girl started crying softly, trying to wipe away the tears with her napkin. "It's hard, Mister Matthews, Peter. I was doing OK, but then this thing came up and I don't know what to do. I don't want to go to my folks; they'll sweep down here and load me on a plane to Boston. I'm trying to deal with it."

I leaned forward and took her hands in mine. She looked like a small scared child and it almost broke my cynical heart. "Lisa, you have to talk to someone and it might as well be me. I don't know if I can help you, whether you even want me to, but sometimes just having someone to talk to makes things less frightening."

She nodded and wiped the tears away with the back of her hand. "I just found out this week that I have early stage breast cancer. It was a routine examination – it

runs in our family. They detected a lump in my left breast and the x-rays confirmed it. I went to a specialist right away and they want to do a lumpectomy with radiation and chemo. I don't know if I'm up to that and I have a business to run."

"My god, Lisa. I don't know what to say. But, listen to me. I want you to know that you have a friend now and you won't be alone, whatever you decide to do. As for the business, I have a buddy who can help you out. He's my neighbor and a real softie, although he'll scare the shit out of you the first time you meet him."

"I can't let you do that, Peter. You're a total stranger."

"Look, Lisa," I said softly, "We've been enjoying a meal together. That's more time than I spend with most of my friends. I won't take no for an answer. You've got to get the treatment you need and you need it now. Schedule it today. Give me your cell phone and I'll record our numbers." She handed hers over.

"By the way, Lisa, you look like you're about thirteen. Aren't you a little young to have breast cancer?"

"I'm twenty-five and the doctor told me it *was* very unusual to get it this young. He also told me that there had been reports of people, particularly kids, from this area getting leukemia and other cancers. Something they call a cancer cluster. They've got some professor from the University of Florida working on it. Some woman – I didn't get her name."

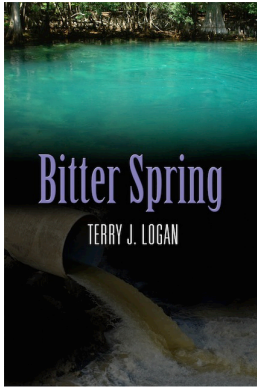
I paid for both our meals, left a nice tip for the young virgin and walked Lisa to her car. "You know of course, Lisa, that this Subaru and the bumper stickers are a cliché. I bet you play folk music and Bob Marley on your CD player."

"How old are you, Peter?" she laughed. He was glad to hear it. "No one my age uses CD players; we have I-Pods. And I listen to heavy metal, thank you."

"Well excuse me little girl, but I actually saw an I-Pod once. Now listen up; schedule that treatment and let me know when it's going to happen. I want to be there and I'll bring my friend as well. We can work out the details later about taking over the business until you're better. I'll even bring my dog, Asa. You'll love her."

Lisa surprised me by hugging me fiercely and holding on. "Thank you, Peter; I don't know what to say. You're a nice guy."

I watched her leave and thought about what had just transpired. I couldn't believe I had just signed on to help a total stranger I had met just an hour ago. I hoped she would call me and I kinda believed she would. She needed help and I'm a sucker for people who have been shit on by life.



The book is set in Southwest Florida and tells how a retired geology professor, Peter Matthews, discovers a link between abandoned phosphate mines in the area and chemical contamination of a number of freshwater springs. He further discovers, with the help of an epidemiologist from The University of Florida, Dr. Samantha Baer, that people living in the vicinity of the springs are getting cancer at an unusually high rate. Matthews enlists the help of his neighbor, Max Hand, a retired Marine Gunnery Sergeant. They live in the small fishing village of Cortez in Manatee County. Max provides the beef Matthews needs when Peter discovers that the mines are being used to inject toxic wastes in the groundwater.

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