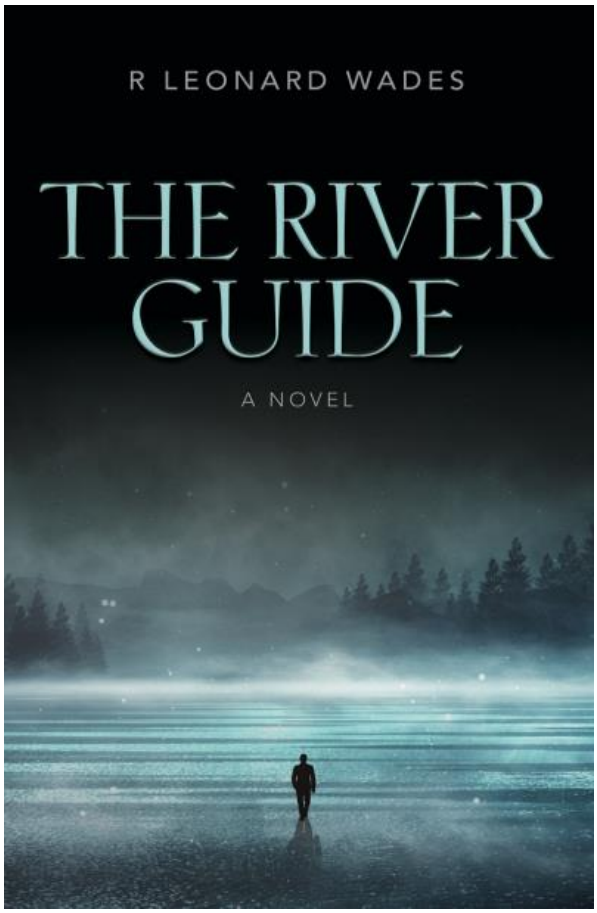

During Fourth-of-July weekend, an aging fly-fishing guide is hired to conduct a float-trip for clients from out-of-State. Throughout the evening, and the two days that follow, he is guided on his own journey to an unexpected destination.

The River Guide
By R Leonard Wades

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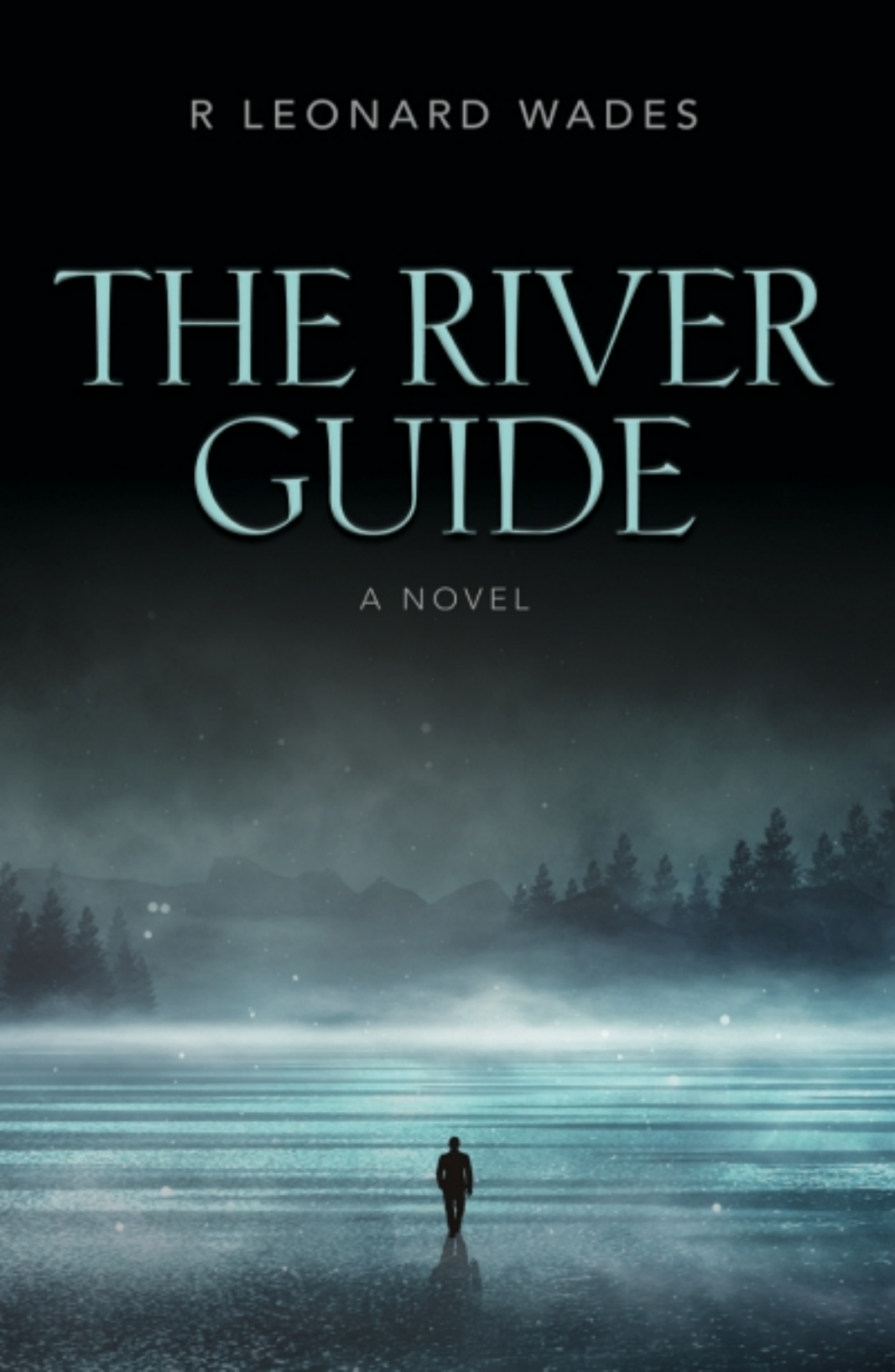
R LEONARD WADES

THE RIVER GUIDE

A NOVEL



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Chapter 1

Henry Morrison found himself perspiring as he opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. He rose on his elbows and checked the moonlit corners of his bedroom. That his life didn't turn out as planned shouldn't have come as a surprise, but it did. Sleep came fitfully at his age, but July 3rd was a special day. He expected the memories to come in waves, and, in fact, they had already begun.

Henry thought about his father's passing twenty-five years earlier. As William lay dying in cabin #3, he reached out and tugged at the front of his son's sweatshirt. Henry leaned forward and listened as the old man argued his final case. A gifted attorney, William used a single sentence to make his summation, admitting that his life didn't turn out as planned.

"*Men rarely live up to their own expectations . . . or those of the people they love.*"

As much a warning as an apology or an admission of guilt, the deathbed statement had been troubling Henry for close to a decade. Memory had become nightmare, and the dream now awakened him two or three times a week, but the onslaught of time also brought wisdom and, with it, clarity.

"*A fitting tribute to an old man,*" he thought, "*then as well as now.*"

Henry rolled over and stared at the clock-radio next to his bed; "5:27" appeared in large, red numerals. He closed his eyes and tried to rest, but the image had been seared into his retinas. Time slowed in torturous fashion when he couldn't sleep. Usually, it raced along like the river in front of his home, hours contracting, days accelerating as the years rolled by. A theory of relativity for the elderly.

Henry opened his eyes and stared at the clock. Six minutes had elapsed, but it felt like an eternity. He buried his face in the pillow

and groaned, saying, “Ahh, to hell with it! I’ll never get back to sleep now.”

Henry kicked away the covers and rolled out of bed as the first hint of sunrise glimmered on the eastern horizon. His body ached as he slipped into clothing worn the previous day; moss-green, convertible fishing pants, and a lightweight, vented shirt that smelled like scotch, remnants of a drink spilled the evening before.

Henry gripped the bannister and braced a hand against the wall as he pogoed down the staircase to the ground floor. He hobbled into the kitchen, picked up his favorite mug and rinsed away the desiccated remains of several insects. He poured himself some black coffee and swallowed a couple Ibuprofen tablets as he sipped from the mug. Henry reached for the door to go outside, but he came to a sudden stop. Several one-hundred-dollar bills lay scattered on the kitchen table.

“Damn, I forgot . . . I have a client.” Henry collected and counted the money. “*Eight-hundred dollars.*” The amount seemed excessive. He folded the bills and tapped them in the palm of his hand as he tried to recall the conversation with his guest. “*Or were there guests?*” . . . “I guess it doesn’t matter now,” he said.

Henry stuffed the cash into his pocket and emerged from his lodge at sunrise. He stood beneath the portico and stared at the entrance to cabin #1. There were no lights to be seen, only the nondescript form of an SUV. He couldn’t even remember what his guests looked like.

Henry descended five granite steps and followed a flagstone path that led to the workshop at the back of his property. Small branches, pinecones and leaves, evidence of a thunderstorm that had blown through overnight, lay scattered on the ground around him. With every breath of wind, water was shaken from sodden branches. It dripped from gutters and clattered against the building’s metal roof.

Henry arrived at the workshop entrance and removed a keyring from the pocket of his trousers. He thumbed through the keys and tested each one in the lock. The day had barely begun, and he was already angry.

"How the hell did I end up with so many keys that look alike?" Henry unlocked the swollen door and forced it open with his shoulder. "*Fifth time's a charm,*" he thought.

Henry stepped inside and turned on the lights. He inhaled cautiously, testing the air. The odor of mildew, mold and aging wood was unmistakable. He recognized the decay but felt helpless to do anything about it. To be truthful it could only be blamed on a lack of motivation. Henry didn't give a damn.

The river guide shuffled to a workbench located in front of a window that faced the back of his home. His coffee had gone cold, and he was suffering the effect of too much alcohol consumed the evening before. He reached overhead and opened one of the storage cabinets mounted to the wall on either side of the glass. His calves ached and his shoulder was on fire as he stood on his toes and clawed at a bottle hidden in the back. Henry grabbed an old T-square, hooked the bottle, and knocked it onto its side. He pulled the stopper, poured a double shot of whiskey into the mug, and stirred it with the stained handle of an old paintbrush. As Henry brought the mug to his lips, the sound of distant laughter startled him.

"What the hell was that?" he asked, but there was no response from the spirits residing in the workshop.

Henry thought it sounded like his grandfather, spinner of fables, believer in the power of a well-timed joke; a jovial, loving man until he was angered. He changed his mind and settled on his son as the source of the laughter. Henry ducked his head and glanced out the window as the sound materialized at the front of the workshop. A flash of color, red and black, wings beating, darted between the trees. A pileated woodpecker landed on a distant ash tree and hammered into the bark.

"No fool like an old fool," Henry said. The incident had raised the specter of his grandfather. The old man had been dead for over fifty years, but his voice hadn't lost its authority. "*You were raised better than this.*"

Henry wandered through the workshop as fluorescent lights flickered above. Scattered tools showed early indications of rust, and sawdust of a vintage rivaling some fine wines covered the surfaces of

several unfinished projects. Henry returned to the window and pushed against the frame, but it had become frozen from disuse.

He mocked himself and began to laugh. “It won’t be long before they take you to the nut-house.” Henry had encountered old men who talked to themselves, but it never occurred to him that he might become one of them.

Fresh air tumbled into the room as the window let loose with a loud, “pop!” Henry looked past the pines and searched the yard next to his home. His eyes settled on several bales of straw stacked at the edge of the forest. A blue, plastic tarp, torn to shreds and faded by years of exposure to the elements, covered the pile. The twine holding the bales together had disintegrated years earlier. Putrid, brown straw poked through the holes on top while the bales on the bottom had already returned to the earth. Henry thought about firing up the old Bobcat and leveling what remained, but even in an advanced state of decomposition the archery target acted as a pleasant reminder of the past.

* * * * *

“Thwock!” . . . The impact of David’s final arrow produced a distinctive sound as it penetrated the target. The cluster formed an indistinct group around the bullseye.

“Try to beat that,” Henry’s son said, lowering his compound bow.

An old-fashioned longbow dangled from Henry’s fingers as he stepped to the thirty-yard mark. “Let me show you how it’s done, son.” He drew the bowstring back and anchored the arrow at the corner of his mouth.

David searched for any advantage over his father and apparently thought gamesmanship would improve his odds. “Are you sure you can you see the target? You should be wearing bifocals at your age.”

Henry let the arrow fly and drove it almost dead center. “I’ll let you know when I need them.” He didn’t feel old, and at fifty-two he didn’t think he looked old, but when he gazed in the mirror a stranger sometimes stared back. Henry drove the remaining arrows within his

son's grouping. "Better luck next time," he said. "It'll take more than an ill-timed comment to throw me off my game."

"You always say that, but it never happens," David replied.

"I've been doing this for over forty years . . . Your day will come. I'm sure that in twenty years you'll be able to kick my ass at just about everything."

"Just about everything?"

Henry couldn't resist rubbing a little salt into the wound. "Everything but fly-fishing."

"Ha-ha, very funny. You should be using a cane by then."

The loser had been tasked with retrieving the arrows. Henry's son shook his head and muttered to himself as he shuffled toward the target. When David was a child, he had been allowed the occasional victory. Like any good father, Henry wanted to boost his son's self-confidence. As David neared adulthood, the realities of life dictated that all victories had to be earned.

* * * * *

A gust of wind entered the open window and sent age-yellowed sheets of paper – plans for a clawfoot table – floating to the floor in random arcs. Henry picked up the scattered pages and placed them on the workbench. He anchored them with the T-square that once belonged to his grandfather.

Henry turned and stared out the window, examining the straw. Its transformation into a pile of rotting vegetation was complete, and its future, like his, was assured. There was no mistaking its suitability only as compost.

Henry snapped an old rag that expelled a cloud of dust. It hung in the air for a moment before drifting away on the breeze. Henry rubbed the windowpanes as a prelude to cleaning the workshop, but his half-hearted effort was interrupted by the sound of an argument arising from the only occupied rental cabin. He hurried to the workshop entrance and watched as a teenager pushed his way through the door to cabin #1.

"I'm leaving when I turn eighteen, and there's nothing you can do about it," the boy said.

A middle-aged man emerged seconds later. “Come back, please,” he begged.

The teenager cursed and kicked at the stones as he marched down the gravel driveway. His head was bowed, and he showed little interest in his surroundings. With his mind preoccupied, and his anger focused elsewhere, the boy didn’t realize he was being observed. He removed a cell phone from the pocket of his trousers and swiped and tapped the screen at breakneck speed. The man continued pleading but soon recognized the futility of the effort. He stood on the driveway with his hands in his pockets, watching the teenager storm away.

The boy might not have noticed Henry standing at the entrance to the workshop, but the man was more observant. He appeared in the doorway as Henry tossed scrap-wood into a large plastic trash can. The word, “kindling,” hastily scrawled with a magic marker, appeared on the side of the container.

The man removed his fishing hat and smoothed his receding hair as he scanned the interior. He smiled and approached Henry with his hand extended. “I’m Mike. We met last night.”

“I remember,” Henry said. It was a lie, of course.

“I thought you might have forgotten.”

Henry used his own 5’10”, one-hundred-and-eighty-pound frame as a yardstick. His guest was a couple inches taller, but he appeared to weigh about the same. Mike was middle-aged, perhaps in his late forties or early fifties. Based upon his appearance, and the firmness of his grip, he seemed to be in good condition. He was unlike most of Henry’s middle-aged clients.

A shadowy recollection culled from memories of the previous evening filled Henry with a sense of dread. He stared at his guest and tried to recall the conversation, but his memory became unreliable whenever he overindulged in scotch whiskey.

Mike picked up a partly completed table leg and held it like a club as he looked it over. “Is something wrong?” he asked.

Henry took a step backward. “I was trying to remember something.”

Mike gestured toward his cabin. “I’m sorry about the commotion. It won’t happen again.”

Henry understood the difficulties of communicating with a teenager, and he tried to put his guest at ease. “No apology necessary. I’ve had some experience with that.”

Mike set the table leg down and strolled through the room. “Do you mind if I look around?” he asked.

“Make yourself at home, why don’t you.” Henry replied. His guest didn’t recognize the sarcasm.

Mike took his time and examined everything as he meandered through the room. The power tools and unfinished projects seemed to be a source of fascination. He removed an old bed sheet and ran his hand across the cover to a roll-top desk; a sad memory entombed in the back of the workshop twenty-five years earlier.

“This is beautiful,” he said. “You do nice work.”

Henry was embarrassed by his failure to take better care of the space and its contents. Another man might not have noticed, but Mike, driven by a curiosity that seemed insatiable, couldn’t have missed it.

Henry’s client examined a collection of fine hand tools, the types used by an artisan. They seemed out of place surrounded by power equipment used for furniture construction. Awls, gouges, wood-carving knives, and several saws were meticulously arranged and confined to a workbench of their own. A Fordham Tool with a long flexible shaft hung from a hook anchored in a ceiling truss. Unfinished woodcarvings crowded the back of the table and the shelves above.

Mike picked up a duck decoy and examined it as he turned it in his hands. “You carve wood, too?”

Henry looked away and shook his head as he continued filling the garbage can. “Those belong to my son.”

“I’d love to try something like this, but I never seem to have the time,” Mike said.

Henry had learned the rudiments of furniture construction from his grandfather. To design and build a new piece of furniture required an artistic sensibility, a discerning eye, but he didn’t consider his

hobby a pure art-form. David, on the other hand, was a true artist. He could breathe life into a block of wood and create an object that appeared animate. The origin of his talent was a mystery. The union of Henry and Ruth, acting like a key, might have released the ability when David was conceived.

"You and your son are both talented," Mike said.

Henry hesitated, unwilling to admit the truth. The contents of the workshop could have been stolen and he wouldn't have cared. As for his son's tools, Henry always made sure they were in perfect condition. They were the only tools he would miss.

"I haven't built anything in a long time," Henry said. He anticipated a lecture about wasted potential but heard only silence. Henry looked up and discovered he was being observed.

Mike removed his glasses and cleaned the lenses in a shirttail. He started to speak, but he was interrupted almost immediately. "There's something I should tell you . . ."

The teenager timed his return perfectly as he plodded up the gravel driveway. White athletic shoes, covered with sand and dirt, labored through the stones. The morning walk did little to mollify him. He cursed under his breath, and he was still clutching the phone as he passed by. The boy paused at the entrance to cabin #1. He peeked through a small windowpane, removed his shoes, slipped inside and quietly closed the door.

Mike sighed. "That's my son . . . I guess I should go."

Henry followed him from the building. "What did you want to tell me?"

Mike held up his hand as he walked away. "That'll have to wait. We'll talk later."

The exchange felt strangely familiar, and it made Henry uneasy. He returned to the workbench, but he couldn't concentrate on the task at hand. He slammed the window shut, emerged from the building, and wandered beneath the pines as he sipped from the mug containing the spiked remains of his coffee. Pine boughs rattled and hissed as a gust of wind passed through the trees. Henry turned his face skyward and closed his eyes as a shower of raindrops fell from the branches above.

Henry opened his eyes and stared at the mug, a gift from his son. It should have been a source of sadness, but he chuckled as he read the sentiment baked into its surface: "*World's Best Father! – World's Second-Best Fly-fisherman!*" Henry's hand dropped to his side. The chipped, coffee-stained mug, weighted with memories, hung like an anchor from his fingers.

Henry settled on a destination and shuffled to the front of his lodge. He took a seat on one of the boulders that lined the riverbank. His eyes were drawn to the SUV parked near the entrance to cabin #1. Henry had the uneasy feeling that his guests were going to be trouble.

Chapter 19

Henry navigated a long, sweeping bend in the river. Its breadth grew wider as the depth became shallower, only calf deep in spots. The current slowed as water meandered over sand bars and between small islands of vegetation. Henry no longer had the luxury of using the oars to simply steer the boat. He wanted to maintain an efficient pace, and he strained as he drove them through the water. Perspiration appeared on his forehead, and a bead of sweat ran down the middle of his back. Its progress was noticeable as it slid down his spine to his beltline.

Henry reached into the cooler and retrieved a bottle of water for himself. Showing evidence of his equally parched condition, Jake licked his lips and drew a forearm across his brow. Henry retrieved a second bottle and poked him in the arm. The boy smiled, nodded, and rolled the chilled container over the back of his neck. He confirmed his need for liquid by gulping down the contents.

The air temperature hovered in the low eighties as the sun shined brightly in the west, but Henry discounted those as the only reasons for his overheated condition. He was fast approaching the one home he didn't want to pass.

"Bannockburn Lodge" was owned by the Carlyle family, one of the wealthiest in the nation. Their personal holdings included estates in Chicago, New York, and London, as well as vacation properties located in exclusive destinations throughout the world: Tuscany, the French Riviera, Grand Cayman Island and Aspen, Colorado, among others. The family rarely made an appearance at Bannockburn Lodge; however, Henry knew they would be in residence. They had to maintain a century old tradition by throwing their annual Independence Day celebration. The event would be attended by

wealthy friends who owned property along the river and by others from Chicago, Detroit, and New York.

Henry left behind the tree-shrouded riverbanks and the properties of less noticeable stature. He drifted into a clearing that dominated the south side of the river. A large, log home sat at the top of a gentle slope, one-hundred-and-fifty yards away. The building seemed out of place within the natural surroundings.

Bannockburn Lodge hardly qualified as a fishing retreat. A manicured lawn, two tennis courts, and in-ground pool were visible from the river. Stables and fenced pastures, as well as temporary living quarters for staff – cooks, maids and butlers – occupied the area nearest the road. The landscaped portion took up thirty acres, and the entire property platted out at just over two-hundred-and-eighty.

A full-time caretaker, a local named, Judd Foster, lived with his family in a home near the entrance. Town residents laughingly referred to him as "the lord's gamekeeper." The insult was borne out of jealousy. His yearly salary was greater than that of the fire chief and the sheriff, combined.

Henry considered their use of the term, "lodge," to be fallacious. His own home was a lodge. Reasonably sized, and traditionally designed, its impact upon the land was minimal. Bannockburn Lodge could only be referred to as one thing . . . a mansion. Thirty-six rooms and a six-stall garage confirmed Henry's opinion. With over one-thousand feet of frontage on both sides of the river, Bannockburn Lodge announced the social status of its owners.

The family's good fortune could be attributed to their founding patriarch, Angus Carlyle. Arriving in America during the mid-1870's, the Scottish immigrant proceeded to build an empire that included everything from meat-packing and industrial machining to mining and railroad interests. Angus amassed a fortune and established a legacy that allowed his descendants to branch out into other fields: high technology, media, aviation, and pharmaceuticals. After further expansion into banking and finance, the breadth of their economic domination was complete. The diversity of their holdings, and the power that they wielded over both political parties in

Washington DC, made them impervious to the cultural and economic fluctuations of the times.

Henry had been hoping to avoid detection as he drifted past the property, but several children appeared in the distance, playing in thigh deep water. The in-ground pool, probably smelling of chlorine, had been abandoned, apparently deemed too mundane by children who spent most of their time in densely populated cities to the south.

Henry glanced up the lawn and observed the preparations that were underway for the celebration that would begin the following day. He looked downstream and saw two women sitting in Adirondack chairs, sipping what appeared to be iced teas. They shielded their eyes from the sun as they stared in his direction.

One of the women walked onto the dock for a better view. "Henry is that you? Get over here and talk to us." The children moved aside as he brought the boat into contact with the dock and secured it to one of the support posts. "It's wonderful to see you," she said. "How long has it been?"

Henry bent over and cleaned up trash that had accumulated in the bottom of the boat. "Four or five years, I guess. How've you been, Maggie? . . . I mean, Margarette."

"That's okay, you can call me Maggie. Old habits are hard to break."

The children crowded around the drift-boat and hurled questions at Mike and Jake. Without waiting for answers, they asked about the fishing gear, Jake's phone, and the funny looking boat. Maggie ran out of patience and drove them away. The tykes splashed through the water, climbed the riverbank, and ran in the direction of the pool.

Henry's body deflated. "Are they all yours?"

Maggie pointed at two of the children. She described their swimsuits and called them "Matilda" and "Jeffrey." She identified them as her grandchildren and then referred to the others as friends of the family. She sounded exasperated as she commented on their boundless energy.

"They sure can run you ragged, but you know . . ." Maggie cut herself off mid-sentence. "I'm sorry, Henry."

"No offense taken," he said. "Who's your friend?"

"That's my daughter, Maureen."

Henry did a quick comparison as the women stood next to each other on the dock. Maureen was no longer a little girl. She had been transformed into a thirty-eight-year-old mother of two. She looked like a younger version of her mom, sharing physical traits, the same mannerisms, and a similar gait. They could have passed for sisters. Maggie appeared to be in her late forties, but, at sixty-four years of age, she was only a year younger than Henry. He suspected her good fortune was due to the advantages of wealth – the stress-free comfort of money and the talent of the surgeon's blade.

Maureen reached out and shook his hand. "It's nice to see you again, Mr. Morrison."

Henry had always liked her. She was a polite child, unpretentious and drama-free. As he looked into her eyes, he recognized the girl who had enrolled in his fly-fishing class, twenty-six years earlier.

* * * * *

Henry stood beside his wife in the yard next to the lodge. David, a rambunctious five-year old, roamed the lawn with Laser, the family dog.

"Welcome to Cross-Current Fly-fishing School. I'm Henry Morrison," he said, "and this is my wife, Ruth." Henry and Ruth had established the school four years earlier, hoping to introduce the sport to interested youngsters.

The children, ranging in age from eleven to thirteen, stood on the lawn holding fly-rods supplied by Henry. As Ruth read from the enrollment sheet, she called out the name, Maureen Hargrove. Henry scanned the group and picked her out before she had an opportunity to respond. Maureen and the girl standing next to her giggled as they whipped the fly-rods back and forth above their heads.

Ruth repeated the name. "Maureen Hargrove?"

"Here," she answered.

With long blond hair and bright blue eyes, Maureen favored her mother. She was also entering the awkward teenage years. Trapped

between little girl and young woman, she struggled to control her gangly body.

Henry and Ruth walked along the row of students coaching and correcting them. He arrived at Maureen's position and instructed her on proper casting form. Henry laid the fly-line out on the lawn in front of her and then knelt in the grass and gently took her hand.

"Lift the line off the surface before you snap the rod back," Henry said. "And when you're casting, don't let your wrist break. Cast with your forearm." He guided her hand through several cycles and then watched her repeat the exercise. "That's good. You catch on fast."

Maureen blushed. "Thanks, Mr. Morrison" Her eyes followed Henry's son as he ran after the dog. "Is that your little boy?" she asked.

"That's David," Henry replied. "And his victim is Laser."

Maureen giggled as she watched them interact. "Who's that older lady?"

"That's my mother. She's keeping an eye on the human wrecking ball."

Throughout the session, Maureen was quick to help the other students when they encountered difficulties. While waiting for a ride home, she scooped David up in her arms and played with the little boy and his dog.

* * * * *

"You're all grown up," Henry said. "Where did the time go?"

"I ask myself that every day," Maureen replied.

Jake no longer paid attention as the addictive power of the Internet called to him. His head was bowed, and his hands were in his lap as he held his phone. The boy appeared to be in mourning, as if praying to God for deliverance. With his concentration focused elsewhere, he didn't notice the approach of a beautiful young woman. At six feet tall, she looked like a model. Long blond hair and beautiful blue eyes confirmed her genetic connection to the Carlyle family. Her appearance was ethereal as she floated across the lawn and struck a willowy pose on the dock.

Maggie reprimanded herself for a breach of etiquette. “Where are my manners? Won’t you introduce us to your friends?”

Henry had been engrossed in the conversation, and he had forgotten about his clients. His formality sounded strange and looked even stranger as he held out his hand and moved it between the parties.

“Mrs. Margarette Pennington, I’d like you to meet Dr. Michael Johnson.

“It’s no longer Pennington,” she said. “It’s just plain old Carlyle.”

“I’m sorry,” he replied.

Maggie’s mood seemed unusually buoyant. “Two down, one to go.”

“Excuse me?”

“I think I might have one more opportunity to get it right.”

Henry placed a hand on the edge of the dock and gently rocked the boat. “Always the optimist.”

“Sure, what’s the alternative?”

Mike revealed an unexpected streak of charm as he reached out and shook her hand. “There’s nothing plain or old about you, Margarette.”

Maggie blushed. “A doctor and a smooth-talker. You’re a double threat, Mike.”

Mike pointed to his son. “That’s Jake down there with his face buried in that cell phone.”

Jake was engrossed with his phone and oblivious to the beautiful young woman who stood above him on the dock. He looked up and discovered that the sixty-four-year-old woman had been replaced by a beautiful teenage girl. The girl giggled and bit her lip. An arm hung by her side as the other held it from behind. Long blond hair cascaded around her face and past her shoulders. The weight of her lean body was supported on one supple leg. With her hip pushed out slightly, the other leg was relaxed and set at an angle. The girl looked like she was about to perform a graceful ballet move. Jake tried to speak, but the shock of her presence stunned him. Her angelic

beauty and youthful sexuality stopped him before he could utter a word.

Maggie toyed with the boy while reminding Henry of the past. "Oh no, not again. Didn't you have a similar reaction a long time ago?"

Henry and Jake didn't know how to respond as women separated by three generations stood above them on the dock.

Maggie said, "That's my grandniece, Sarah."

Sarah released the hold she had on her other arm and reached out to the young man. Jake could only mumble, "Hi," as he cradled her hand. Her effect upon the boy was obvious, especially to her. Sarah took a seat on the edge of the dock and, without a struggle, removed the smartphone from his hand. She tossed her locks to one side and then swiped and tapped the screen at breakneck speed. Sarah reached for the heart-shaped locket that hung around her neck. She rubbed it against her lower lip as her eyes shifted between the boy and his phone.

Henry watched as she cast a spell on the clueless young man. He felt what could only be described as annoyed admiration. "Do they send women somewhere to learn that or is it passed down in secret ceremonies from mother to daughter?"

"Sometimes it's passed down from grandmother to grandniece," Maggie said.

Maggie couldn't resist revealing her past association with Henry. They had been romantically linked at one time, but he had thrown her over for another. "Henry and I dated when we were about the same age, but things didn't work out for us. I hope the same thing doesn't happen to Sarah."

Henry stared at the gunwale of the boat and scratched at a bubbled spot of varnish. He tried to ignore the lingering anger hidden in her statement.

Mike tried to defuse the situation by making light of the implied romance. "Let's not marry them off yet."

"I suppose not. They're still young," Maggie said.

Maggie was obviously joking about Sarah and Jake, but she was being truthful about her relationship with Henry, forty-seven years earlier. At the time, they weren't much older than the two teens.

The strain of being in Maggie's presence began to wear on him, and he wanted to leave. "We have a schedule to keep," he said. Henry unmoored the boat and drifted away. He looked back at Maggie as she stood alone on the dock. "Like I said before, I'm sorry how things turned out back then."

Maggie held up her hand in acknowledgement. The gesture was done slowly with her arm barely raised and the fingers parted. Its appearance reinforced the sadness hidden in the lines of her face.

Maggie aimed a final comment at Mike. "If you get a chance, have Henry tell you the helicopter story. You'll love it."

Once out of range, Mike dug for more information. "When did you two date?"

"We met in the summer of 68', and we were together until just before my discharge."

"How old were you?"

"I was eighteen, and she was seventeen. Why do you ask?"

Mike paused. "That was forty-seven years ago."

Henry shrugged his shoulders. "So?"

"That's a first. I've never met a woman who has carried a torch for forty-seven years."

Henry released an oar and waved the proposition away. "Don't be a fool."

"That woman is still in love with you."

"That's why I have to keep apologizing for the past," Henry said.

"I heard you apologize, but I didn't hear her ask for one." The doctor seemed to be concealing a joke as he snickered. His obsession with the topic felt like abuse.

"What now?" Henry asked.

"What did you do to her . . . or for her back then?"

Henry shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. He couldn't answer because he didn't know.

Jake became excited and almost jumped out of his seat. He leaned forward and held out his smartphone for the others to see. "That girl, Sarah, entered her name and phone number into my Contacts list."

Henry chuckled as he eyed the tiny screen. "And so, it begins."

The boy's reaction reminded Henry of his own youthful passion, decades removed, yet still clear in his memory like the trilliums growing from the forest floor on either side of the boat. Each delicate, white flower a memorial to lost wilderness, lost innocence, lost youth . . . lost love. Henry's thoughts drifted to his wife. Ruth enjoyed a manicured garden as much as anyone, but wildflowers were more her speed, and the trillium was her favorite. Henry wanted to hold her. He longed to make love to her while lying in the meadow, hidden beyond the trees across the road from the lodge. He thought about Elise and his youthful mistake; the child that would never love or be loved while experiencing those worldly pleasures. Finally, there was Maggie – an undeserved love – a flower torn out by the roots before it had an opportunity to bloom.

Henry accepted it as karma. "*It's only fair,*" he thought. The doctor's voice seeped in from outside.

"Could I ask you something else?"

Henry came to his senses and discovered he was drifting toward several submerged logs cantilevered in the water near shore. He spun the drift-boat on its axis and moved into the main channel of the river, but not before scraping the hull. Henry grimaced as he looked over the starboard side and ran his hand across the damage. Bare wood and shallow gouges appeared where the spar varnish had been stripped away.

"Damn it! . . . What do you want to know?" Henry asked.

"With Maggie in love with you why enlist?"

"Like everything else in life, it comes down to timing. I thought I could take control of my destiny."

Chapter 36

A full moon, rising in the east, kept pace with the setting sun. Bats dodged and weaved above the river, feeding upon the same insects that provided sustenance to the trout. Individual trees fused into a single mass in the waning light, and the surrounding land faded from view with the approach of night. Soon, only the river's surface and the sky would be visible as light danced between them.

The discussion that Henry and his client were having about the soldiers who had died had apparently struck too close to home. Mike didn't seem eager to continue. Henry preferred it that way; he didn't want to delve too deeply into his client's memories. The doctor seemed content as he lost himself in the rhythm of the fly-rod, but the silence had only been a lull in the conversation. He couldn't stop thinking about those he couldn't save.

Mike resurrected the conversation, breaking the spell cast by water and sky. His greatest gift became a curse. The exceptional memory that allowed him to excel in medical school also allowed him to remember the faces of those soldiers. The festering emotional wound could be seen in his eyes.

"Some are so clear in my mind that they could be standing right in front of me."

"I'm sorry,' Henry said. "I shouldn't have raised the subject."

"It doesn't matter," Mike replied. "The memories are always there, hidden just below the surface."

Henry was pleased by the appearance of Stevenson's Flat in the distance. Because of its location between long, deep sections of river, it was frequented by mature trout that entered the shallows to feed. The knee to thigh deep water was easily navigated on foot and required no more than an hour to complete. Henry warned his clients

that they shouldn't, under any circumstances, proceed further downstream.

"The bend in the river just past the beginning of the park is over twelve feet deep in spots. You don't want to experience that, especially at night," Henry said. "I'll light a lantern and hang it from a post to mark the exit point."

Henry wasn't worried about his clients. Mike and Jake were seasoned fly-fishermen, and there was still plenty of ambient light available to navigate the river. Sundown north of the 45th parallel didn't occur until almost 10-PM, and it wouldn't be completely dark for an additional hour. Their arrival at the park would be greeted with a little relaxation and a quick bite to eat. Afterwards, Henry would conduct his clients downstream to Howe's Run and the anticipated hatch.

Stevenson's Flat had always been an important location in the life of Henry's family, but an incident involving his father bore unique significance. In the summer of 1990, William drove north to visit David, who had just turned five. William's appearance came as a shock. Gaunt and pale, he no longer resembled the strapping man that Henry remembered. As always, Henry's dad refused a room in the lodge, choosing instead to stay in one of the guest cabins. William spent hours in the workshop, watching his son work, and he became noticeably emotional when presented with a roll-top desk. He asked that it be placed in his cabin, and he used it to write every day.

Henry knew something was wrong when his father asked to be taken fly-fishing. William was introduced to the sport at Stevenson's Flat. Henry taught him to cast with minimal acceptability, and the old man caught his first trout at the age of seventy. The memory of William laughing as he held the fish, then releasing it into the river, was still clear in Henry's mind. The Morrison men visited Stevenson's Flat several times that summer, and they even took David along a couple of times. History was made when three generations finally experienced the river together.

Henry anticipated a visit of one or two weeks, but William kept extending his stay. Fearing the worst, Ruth insisted that Henry

question his father. He inquired after William's health as they sat together, watching the sunset.

* * * * *

Henry strolled around the side of cabin #3, already knowing where his father could be found. "Permission to come aboard," Henry said.

William saluted from a table on the porch. "Permission granted. Have a seat . . . And have a drink."

William had anticipated his son's arrival because an extra glass was waiting, and the ice bucket was full. Henry picked up the bottle and poured a few fingers of scotch before noticing the label.

"This is twenty-five-year-old single malt! Did you win the lottery?"

"No. I figured we had it coming."

Henry initiated the conversation as the sun dipped below the horizon. "Ruth and I couldn't help noticing that you've been here almost three weeks . . ."

". . . I can pack up and leave," William said, interrupting his son. "I know I've overstayed my welcome."

"*Some things never change*," Henry thought, as he held up his hand. "You can stay as long as you want. We're concerned. Is everything alright?" William didn't respond, and he avoided eye contact. Henry felt a sense of dread, and he could no longer deal with the suspense. "I noticed the change in your appearance when you arrived. I'm your son. I have a right to know what's happening."

William's eyes were distant, his voice hollow. "It's cancer . . . I've been to specialists, but there's nothing they can do."

It felt like the air had been sucked out of Henry's lungs. "Is it terminal?"

William nodded. Tears formed in his eyes as he took another belt from his rock glass. Henry felt dizzy, but it wasn't the effect of the whiskey. William picked up the bottle and tried to refill his glass, but his hand shook. Henry reached over and completed the task.

"What kind of cancer are we talking about?"

William rested his wasted arms on the table. "Pancreatic."

Henry knew his dad was finished. Only the time element remained. “How long do you have?”

William’s voice wavered. “Three months, if I’m lucky.”

Henry saw that his father was scared. The terror of being alone at the end had to be weighing heavily upon him. “Do you want to stay here?” Henry asked.

William bowed his head and wept. “I have nowhere else to go.”

Henry felt anxious and uncomfortable as he watched his father cry. He turned away and rubbed his hands on his thighs as he stared at the river. Henry picked up the bottle of scotch and read the label, but he couldn’t avoid the situation. He placed a hand on his father’s shoulder and tried to guide him through the breakdown, but the old man needed something more. William reached over and embraced his son. The act of comforting his father was a confusing experience for Henry. He realized that it must come as a shock to all men when they see their fathers cry for the first time.

“Don’t worry, dad. I’ll be here for you.”

“What about Ruth? Won’t she mind?”

“She’ll welcome you with open arms,” Henry said.

William regained his composure. He leaned back in his chair, and for the first time in his life he expressed his feelings. He talked about his choices, those that hurt others and those that hurt himself.

William lowered his eyes and shook his head. “I’ve made too many mistakes. I can never make amends.”

Henry didn’t know how to answer the admission. He responded with one of the few things he remembered from his time at Sunday School. “Ask for forgiveness and it shall be granted unto you.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“I do,” Henry said. “If you really mean it.”

William refilled his glass and took another slug of whiskey. He nodded slowly as he watched the river flow by. Henry didn’t know if he really believed the Biblical promise, but it was meant to provide comfort. Henry knew his own actions would require a spiritual entity with the patience of Job. When the end arrived, he hoped there would be someone available to catch his weary spirit.

* * * * *

Twenty-five years had passed since the death of Henry's father, but the urge to weep was still present. In his final moments, William won the war of words between father and son. He offered a warning about failed expectations and afterwards said something that left his son speechless. He admitted how proud he was of the life, family, and home that Henry had built.

"William Morrison, age seventy-two, passed away on October 22nd, 1990, surrounded by his family."

The two-paragraph summary of William's life began like so many others. The obituary seemed like an insult. An entire lifetime had been distilled down to its essence. But the perspective of time allowed Henry to see there was nothing more. Most men were forgotten after a couple of generations. The only thing that survived in the end was the love that had been felt by them and for them.

The blow to Henry's psyche had been devastating, even greater than after the death of his grandfather. His boundless energy went missing, and it took him several months to recover from the ordeal. The needs of his family forced him to come to grips with his father's passing. The supportive words of friends and their willingness to listen helped him to understand his reaction. Henry mourned not only for the man his father was but also for the relationship that should have existed throughout those many years.

As executor of his father's estate, Henry had been entrusted with the task of dividing up the few assets that remained. William's woeful financial condition didn't come as a surprise. Henry didn't care about the money, and he was pleased that he didn't have to deal with the law practice and house. It was William's pride, his unwillingness to ask for help, that cut Henry to the core. Unable to help him when he was alive, Henry had been left with the insignificant task of carrying out his father's final wishes.

Henry turned the drift-boat toward shore and came to a stop as the river widened to a maximum of two-hundred-and-fifty feet. "Time for you boys to do a little wading," he said.

Mike and Jake stepped into the knee-deep water and did a last-minute check for necessities – headlamps and tools, tippet and flies,

anything that might be missed once Henry departed downstream. The river guide reached into his gear bag and retrieved the final two essentials. He handed each of them a GMRS transceiver.

"They're on, fully charged, and set to the same channel as mine." Henry pressed a button and did a test transmission. "Keep them in your waders or in the pockets on your vests."

"These won't keep us afloat," Mike said.

Jake held the device in his fingertips and examined it with suspicion. "We have cell phones."

"Cell service can be sketchy out here. It's better that I know what's happening, even if I can see you," Henry said.

"Should we contact you?" Jake asked.

"Only if you're confused about your location or, God forbid, in trouble."

Henry waved to the father and son as he drifted away. He was rarely alone on the water, advancing age had seen to that. What remained of his energy was reserved for clients. Henry took his time and examined his surroundings as he navigated around boulders, deadfall, submerged logs, and small islands of vegetation.

Stevenson's Flat was much like the public access where Henry had taken his first steps in the river. It provided the perfect environment to teach the art of fly-fishing. He had been visiting the shallow stretch of water for years, accompanying family, friends, and clients to the location. Young and old, rich and poor, the numbers were impossible to estimate as he reviewed the timeline.

Henry felt a sense of dread as he approached the park, and his presence on Stevenson's Flat was the likely cause. Its importance could be compared to the three stars that formed the summer triangle, rising in the east. For thousands of years, Vega, Deneb, and Altair had been used as a starting point to explore the night sky and teach the mythology associated with the heavens. A significant portion of Henry's family history was tied to Stevenson's Flat, but he couldn't be sure how much was truth and how much was myth.

Henry examined the high bank where the simple honeymoon had been celebrated. His spirit sagged as he observed the lodges that inhabited the once wild ridgeline. Their overbearing forms

dominated the forest, and their lights illuminated the sky, concealing the stars in a harsh glare. The sound of children playing and adults celebrating reverberated through the thick air of early July. Families ignited fireworks while looking forward to the Independence Day celebrations that would begin the following morning.

Henry's eyes were drawn to the north bank of the river, to the park that had been established on David's land. Each time Henry returned he was tormented by thoughts of his family. The lodge that he and his wife built and the little cabin belonging to his grandfather were preeminent in the river guide's memory, but Stevenson's Flat, honeymoon ridge, and David's land finished a close second. The three sites constituted Henry's summer triangle; witness to a history that seemed mythical.

Henry drove the oars through the water and grounded the boat. He lifted a weary leg and clutched his lower back as he stepped into the shallows. Henry lit the Coleman lantern and hung it from a post that had been driven into the riverbank. He turned and watched his clients, in silhouette, glide through the water. His mind seemed to separate, as if bilocating. He was once again shuffling through the river across from his son. David laughed as his mayfly imitator was dragged beneath the surface.

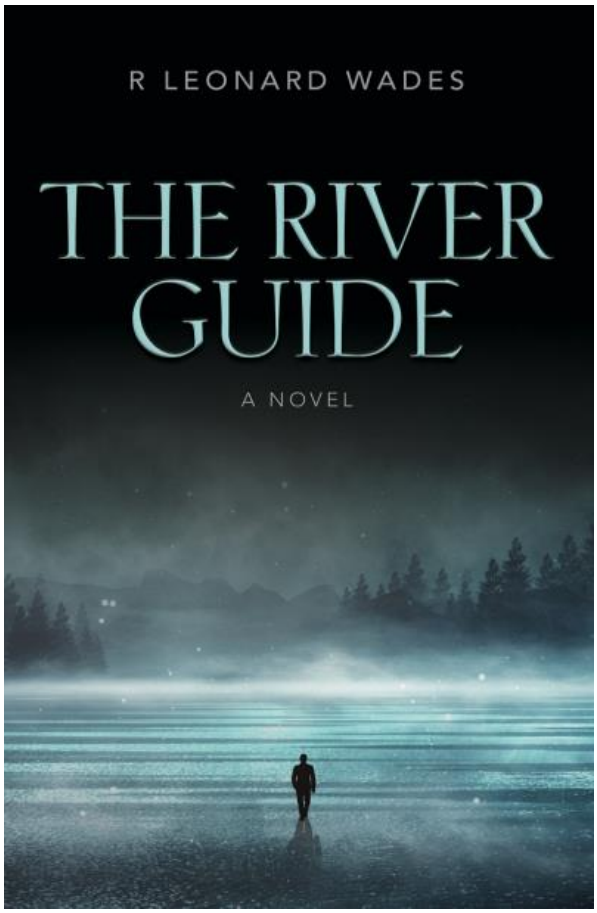
"Keep your rod-tip up," Henry said, but there was no response.

David vanished and Jake reappeared. Mike's son, expressing excitement to splashing water and bended rod, battled an unseen foe.

Henry turned and observed the park. Its condition was more than a disappointment. His eyes flashed angrily as he studied the gift that had been bestowed upon the county. Once sturdy picnic tables had taken on a dull gray color as they aged. Grills that had been shiny and clean were worn and rusty and obviously saw little use. Downed limbs, pinecones and other debris littered the ground. It seemed as if maintenance hadn't been performed in a year. Henry knew that honor would bring him back. It would be up to him, and perhaps a few others, to make the park presentable.

Henry glanced upstream and estimated that his clients would arrive in about forty-five minutes. He had a task to complete, and he set off for the park boundary. Henry saw it as an acceptable

compromise to his normally watchful nature. The call of the forest at the rear of the park was difficult to resist. His goal waited a short distance beyond, hidden among the trees. Henry arrived at a point where the park meets the primeval. He turned on a flashlight, pushed his way through tangled underbrush and followed a poorly defined path that led away from the river.



During Fourth-of-July weekend, an aging fly-fishing guide is hired to conduct a float-trip for clients from out-of-State. Throughout the evening, and the two days that follow, he is guided on his own journey to an unexpected destination.

The River Guide
By R Leonard Wades

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