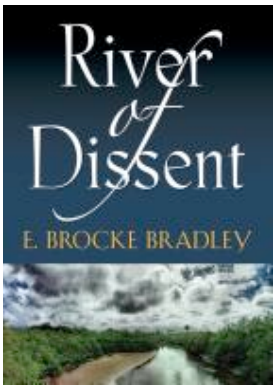
River of Dissent

E. BROCKE BRADLEY



The Apalachicola River is the catalyst that ignites passions, a triangle of illicit love, greed, and a consuming thirst for success and power. A lifelong friendship is challenged as the issue of building a dam divides a small town. What price do you pay for progress?

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Dedication

For all the men and women who lost their lives
on the Apalachicola River.

Chapter One

Through the ghostly morning mist, Lonny Whitfield moved easy across the sandbar, his boots crunching into the half frozen, top layer of sand. His eyes riveted on the trail of two-toed tracks that marked a winding path to the river's edge and then dissolved into the muddy silt. Lonny knelt to trace a slight imprint with one finger, his knees creaked and he winced at the sharp sound, cracking on the stillness. Damn! His eyes scanned the dark surface of the water for the boar. No movement. He muttered, "This time I'll do it. I won't quit until I get you, you cunning son-of-a-bitch!"

As his head turned, Lonny glimpsed a faint reflection of his face on the surface of the murky water. Suddenly a cold chill shook him, goose bumps raised on his arms as the memory came rushing back. He could feel the tiny hairs rise on the nape of his neck. He was a six year old boy again, dark water was closing over his face, numbing cold and a spasm of fear was enveloping him, making him helpless. He was thrashing under the water, his eyes wide with terror. He saw the dark outline of the boat above him and lunged upward, his lungs about to burst. His head hit the underside of the boat, once, twice.

His arms flailed about, grasping for anything. From above he could see hands searching for him, fingers brushed through the ends of his hair. At last, his hair caught

in a strong, tight fist that pulled him up, into the boat and safety. For a moment he felt that feeling of panic, nausea rising from the pit of his stomach. He was drowning, he was alone, listening to his father's laughter ring out, over and over. . . It was so real.

He shook off the chill and stood up; he felt numb. It was an irrational fear, he knew that, but it still haunted him, again and again.

"Damn it!" The curse exploded on the air. "I can't let that mangy ole' boar do it again!"

Lonny smiled, a fleeting grin born of respect for the wild, razorback hog with the one broken tusk and chipped hoof that identified him. The boar that had eluded hunters time after time. The game had gone on for many a season, now the want had turned to need. The prize became more valuable as it became more elusive. The river, the swamp, and the boar had become as much a part of Lonny, who he was, as his breathing. His pale grey eyes drank in the sights and marveled at the fog shrouded November morning. He stood still on the sandbar and inhaled deeply, savoring the sharp twinge, the freshness of cold air as it rushed into his lungs, the musty smell of the bog. His head cleared.

He felt stiff; his joints ached. He stretched his lean, wiry body as he gazed around him, from the tip of the sandbar that jutted out into the muddy river on his left, to the point downstream where the river disappeared from

view around a bend, hidden by swamp willows that bowed and caressed the water. To someone else the river would have appeared gloomy, perhaps threatening in the shadowy, dawn light, but he relished it. Lonny knew every twist and turn, every drifting sandbar and red clay bank. He had swam in the dire muddy waters from boyhood, fished for speckled catfish and bass and bream. He had hunted the boar, the deer, and coon along the river banks. He knew the vine tangled swamp, from the narrow sloughs where the sharp pointed cypress knees made boating risky, to the hilltop stands of turkey oak and sassafras where the white-tailed deer gathered to feed, tails flickering now and then in contentment as they grazed. This river was home, but his home was vanishing fast behind a barrier of barbed wire and fences with "posted" signs. Sign up, boys, pay your yearly fees to hunt on controlled land where the fat-cats just get wealthier. . .and the wild game gets less and less. . . He squinted, his eyes narrowed and turned hard as he stared upriver. The bastards! Long as they didn't touch his territory for a while yet.

A flurry of movement caught his eye. A single white heron lifted off from the opposite bank, hovered, dipped, and then flew away, barely visible through the drifting fog. He looked at the sky. It would lift, by midmorning the haze would be replaced by a warm, sunshiny day, crystalline in its brilliance, so crisp you could almost hear it snap. It would

soar his spirit and shake off that feeling of dread that had plagued him for days. That vague sense of uneasiness had driven him out of bed all hours of the night to wander the yard, just looking. He drank cup after cup of steaming coffee, waiting for the crimson dawn to break in the east.

Lonny must have stood for fifteen minutes, just gazing out across the Apalachicola river, watching the ripples of light that flitted like a shower of diamonds across the water as a hazy sun broke through the fog. It could fool you, this ole' river. The depth and breadth of it disguised the swiftness of the current, but he knew. He had learned the hard way in his twenty-eight years; he would not forget.

As he stood there, lost in aimless thought, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck begin to rise again, a prickling sensation that lasted for only a few seconds. He felt uneasy, his body tensed, he cocked his head and listened intently.

There it was, faint but distinctive, the dogs, baying, on the scent, relentless in their pursuit. In the background, barely audible, the scratchy pattern of a CB radio, the hunters posting one another on their positions and the direction of the dogs. He experienced a momentary flash of sympathy for the deer. Its eyes would be wide with fear, the white flag of a tail raised in alarm as it bounded over the brush. He frowned. Its world was changing too, and so fast there would be no chance for adjustments. A sudden feeling of dark premonition came over him, and with it,

sadness. He shook the stray forelock of lanky hair out of his eyes, shifted the 30-06 rifle to his shoulder and took one last look around the sandbar. The game was ruined, the boar would not return now. No matter, he had a half-day's work at the pole mill and if he got to it, there would be time in the evening for a trip to Ammonia Lake to try his luck. He left the sandbar in a hurry. Behind him, the only noise was a splash as a single fish jumped and then plopped back into the water. Change was in the wind and on Lonny Whitfield's mind, blowing as softly as the southern breeze that nudged the swamp willow to bend and touch the murky river.

From all over the county they came. The work weary farm women left their breakfast cluttered kitchens, and the ruddy faced farmers walked away from brown, shriveled fields that needed to be plowed and sown with a winter ground cover. They braved the chilling north winds to stand on the street corners and argue the issue of the dam. It was a heated argument. Blountstown swelled with people, hungry for debate, the sidewalks gay with straw hats, overalls, print dresses and the multi-colored shawls of the country folk. The red and yellow caterpillar caps and checked flannel shirts of the lumbermen moved in waves through the crowds. Children romped the streets and alleyways as the women seized the chance to visit with

friends they had not seen since the last Saturday they came to town to shop.

By mid-day the groups had formed, the farmers gathered together on one corner, the lumbermen on another. Brown streams of saliva stained the streets as the men stepped to the curb and spat chewing tobacco, each one trying to beat the distance of his friends. The talk became more intense, tempers flared and the air of excitement grew. Some pushed to the limit and harsh words passed among friends. . .

"Hell, I'm for it! This town's been in a slump too long, economy's sagging, ain't no jobs to be found."

"Why you big idiot, ain't nobody but the politicians and land developers going to profit from this—"

"Hell! They can keep the channel clear for shipping without that dam. The dredging has worked for years. It's just another election year trick to get attention!"

"Yeah, somebody's pockets will be full when it's over!"

"Maybe so, but this town ain't going to grow without some industry in here. Hydro-power, that's what they're counting on."

"Hydro-power! Industry! Goddam! They're going to pollute our river! There goes our huntin' and fishin', boys! Why my daddy can remember when them woods was full of wild game. They scarce now, ain't they? And you ask some

of 'em running trot lines how the fishin' has dropped. Why, they took that dam out on the Dead Lakes."

"I ain't studying fishing. I got a wife and four youngns' to feed and that blamed pole mill stays down half the time. We need industry in here. Hell, they ain't going to ruin that river!"

"You keep thinking that, you dammed ole' fool, and just wait till it's too late."

And so it went, on and on.

As she walked down the street from Jesse's grocery, Ruby Rankin took note of the air of turbulence, her steps faltering a bit as she passed a group of people. She couldn't remember seeing such a gathering of people in town since the mayor's funeral—when was that? 1948? Her dark eyes glowed with a feverish intensity and now and then she stole a glance out the corner of one eye, but her face remained void of expression. They stared as she passed and snickered quietly behind her back, but they spoke with a polite gentleness. How ya' doing, Ruby, fine day ain't it? And she acknowledged their greeting with the slightest nod and went on her way, head held high as she pulled the little red wagon behind her, neatly packed with her meager staple of food.

Regular as clockwork, every Saturday morning around nine, Ruby pulled the red wagon, clattering and banging along the sidewalk. She was decked out in her finery, and

what a sight she was! Her plaid, gored skirt ended some three inches above knobby knees, saddle shoes and bobby socks accented the girlishly slender legs that were marked with bulging bluish-purple veins. Usually her white blouse was clean and stiffly starched, and bright red ribbons dangled from the braided salt and pepper pig-tails that hung on each side of the boney face. Her than lips were smeared way above the lip line with the reddest lipstick she could find, and on her cheeks were two splotches of rouge, stark against the pasty white complexion.

It was common knowledge in the county that Ruby was crazy. It was also common knowledge that Ruby was harmless. She had been an eccentric for the majority of her sixty-odd years. A solitary figure, she wandered the streets and alleyways, the object of many a scornful and bemused glance, but yet, accepted, secure in her own niche'. Ruby paid a price for her position in the community.

She was taunted by the children. Sometimes they followed her at a discreet distance and chanted bizarre poems of "Ruby, Red Ruby, does the blood run blue?", and then ran. They invented gruesome stories about her past and repeated them, and now and then, when the moon was full, the boys left dead cats on her doorstep or threw rotten eggs on her front porch that lay in sodden splotches until the morning sun dried them.

Through it all Ruby remained impassive. She kept to herself and asked for no favors, bothered no one. She lived alone on a back street a few blocks from the center of town, in a ramshackle frame house with a sagging front porch nearly obscured from view by high weeds and uncontrolled growth of azalea and bridal wreath bushes. In that neglected house she remained, and the one family member she had, a brother, stopped by now and then to do his duty and check on her.

Because she was an oddity when she walked down the street on Saturday morning, the curious and those who felt superior spoke first, stumbling in their eagerness, anxious to see her reaction. When there was none, they shook their heads and laughed self-consciously and said—that Ruby, nothing ever bothers her—and then put her out of their thoughts and went back to the issue at hand.

The women folk finished their shopping, rounded up marauding children and still the men continued to mingle and argue their point. As the evening shadows deepened and the shopkeepers prepared to close their businesses, the women tried to prod their husbands home. Woman, don't bother me, I'm ready when I'm ready—the children scattered again, to sneak a cigarette behind the café, and the women sighed in resignation and eased into the cabs of scarred and battered farm trucks to wait.

Bit by bit, the sidewalks emptied of people, shops closed and the town became nearly deserted once more. Dusk fell and street lamps glowed, casting distorted shadows along the sides of the old brick buildings. The traffic thinned out to only a few cars passing through town, and on one corner, a city policeman stopped his patrol car to chat and laugh a bit with the occupants of a delivery van.

Ned Stokes stood on the freshly swept sidewalk in front of the hardware store, one arm draped over the parking meter, his fingers raising in salute as a car passed and the driver smiled and spoke. It was nearly noon and already the sun had warmed the nippy, fall air. The streets steamed with vapor as a thin layer of frost melted, making the air smell fresh, spiced with the odors of city living. He sniffed and looked down the street as he loosened the striped tie that graced his white shirt.

Blountstown had grown, no doubt about it. Not that you could tell from standing on Main street on a Monday morning. The shops were small, jammed together, the old buildings mostly faded brick that was crumbling by degrees. The few store fronts that had been remodeled looked somehow out of place as though they had been stuck in at random as an eye-catcher to relieve the monotony of faded, peeling paint and sagging awnings. Even the streets looked outdated. Highway 20 through town was too narrow to

accommodate the sometimes heavy weekend flow of traffic to the beaches along the Gulf Coast. The line of poles supporting the telephone and electric wires overhead gave the two main streets a cluttered and somehow unplanned look. No trees, no flower boxes to adorn the sidewalks. Too bad he hadn't been on the city council planning commission when it was all laid out, but, that had been long before his time.

In contrast, the outskirts of town were well arranged, with wide streets and broad expanses of lush, green lawns enhanced by graceful pecan and oak trees, the red brick and white frame houses set well back from the highway, creating an aura of space and openness. The tiny, but quaint tourist shops blended nicely alongside the homes, and the small shopping centers that sprung up just inside the city limits reflected a spurt of growth in the community.

No longer was the economy totally dependent upon the farmers and lumbermen. Now there was new industry in the area, a sewing factory and boat yard, fast food chains, and scores of small businesses that seemed to spring up by magic, flourish for brief periods, then vanish overnight. Ned's own profits from the hardware store were up twenty percent over the previous year, and he felt confident, sure of the future. But somehow, in the back of his mind, he was still wary. Uneasy, that was it, he felt uneasy, and maybe a

little restless. Maybe it was because she was always pushing him. . . never satisfied. . .

He stepped back from the edge of the curb and looked down the street. Jesse was coming around the corner of the bank, his shiny, bald head clearly visible through the slight crowd. He was bobbing up and down as he made his way along the sidewalk. Jesse never went anywhere at a walk. He trotted, pushing his horn-rimmed glasses up on his skinny nose as he went, nodding and smiling to everyone who glanced in his direction. Jesse had to be the nosiest, the most aggravating, the most impatient man you had ever known in your life, but yet, if there was anything going on in the county that you wanted to know about, all you had to do was ask Jesse Colter.

"You mean you got time on a Monday morning to stand out on the street and gawk at the world?"

"Business is just fine, Jesse," Ned answered, his voice just a trifle annoyed. "You look busy enough for both of us."

"I can't complain either," the slight man said, not looking at Ned but scanning the street first one way and then the other as he fidgeted from side to side. "Doesn't seem to be that busy though, does it?"

"You'll get your share, Jesse, they all have to eat."

"Did you hear the latest?" Jesse asked, lowering his voice to a whisper for effect.

"Really can't say," Ned quipped, shrugging his shoulders, trying to appear uninterested.

Jesse hesitated a second too long.

"Well, dammit, Jesse, what is it?"

"The dogs," he said, his voice raising almost to a squeal, "there's a petition going around to ban the running of the dogs in the county. Some of the farms near the river claim they've lost hogs to bands of hounds on the prowl, and some fences have been cut."

"Never happen. You know the hunters will never stand for that. Running the dogs is a southern tradition going back for generations, 'course you wouldn't have any interest in southern traditions, now would you?"

Jesse would never live down the fact that he was a yankee, even though he had lived in the county for years. He ignored the remark, from past experience he had learned that to defend himself only brought on a deluge of jesting criticism. Southerners enjoyed nothing more than a rousing argument, and there was no point too trivial to be debated.

"Going to be a special council meeting called next week," Jesse said, glad to have something to avert Ned's attention.

"Where'd you hear that? Nobody said anything to me."

"Oh yes, I hear the plans will be finalized on the dam."

Ned shook his head. “Now Jesse, you know we’ve heard those rumors at least six times in the last year and nothing has come of it yet.” He hitched up the belt that was continually creeping down his belly, then straightened his tie, a sign he’d had enough of this nonsense and Jesse was about to be dismissed. “Exactly what did you hear, Jesse?”

“Nothing, not a thing. I got to go. Change fund was low this morning; I should have done that earlier. See you on Wednesday night, eight o’clock sharp.” Still grinning, Jesse bobbled off down the street.

Ned stared after him until the shiny head disappeared from view. Dammed ole’ fool, maybe he did know something. It was a mystery why a yankee had ever been elected to the council anyway. Probably because of the grocery. Jesse made it his business to know everybody in the county, and he never hesitated to extend credit to a needy person, which was why he had made so many friends. Wednesday night, huh? Must be something big or else Jesse would have been blabbing all over town. The dam, was it finally going to happen? Ned felt a momentary surge of excitement, his hands got sweaty and he swiped them along the side of his trousers. No, he had to put the incident out of his mind, no sense jumping the gun. He turned abruptly and went inside the hardware store. There was always a mound of work to be done, and if he was late

getting home tonight, well there would be hell to pay! He smiled, he could make it up to her later. . .

One mile from town, a thin, blue wisp of smoke rose from the tin chimney of the clapboard bait house. It wavered briefly in the dense fog of early morning, then vanished through the low hanging, cold mist that shrouded the forest and river. As the first light of day broke to the east in a red-gold splendor, figures moved about the wooden dock that circled the bait house on three sides, the silence broken by hushed greetings and spurts of laughter that sounded alien on the stillness.

Along the dock, water slapped against the flat bottomed bateaus, echoing faintly, and there was creaking and banging as the throttles of the motors were adjusted. One after another, the motors sputtered, coughed, and came to life with a piercing whine, and as boats and men blended into the mist, cans of beer were tossed into the coolers to await the heat that would surely come by midday. The landing was quiet once more.

Even in transition periods, when there were only a straggle of fishermen in summer and hunters in winter, the bait house endured, dispensing beer, cokes, candy and cigarettes along with bait, while the weathered boards peeled their coat of paint and faded to a dull gray, comfortable in their slight state of neglect. The bait house

became a landmark, a meeting place for scores of children who swam in the river, and boaters who raced their craft on leisurely Sunday afternoons. Eventually the gravel docking ramp was paved in sleek concrete with a public parking area for the cars, trucks, and boat trailers. What was known as McNeal landing was shortened to Neal's Landing and a public picnic area came to being.

It was progress, but still, the bait house refused to conform. The roof was patched from time to time and the dock kept in reasonable repair, but only a few slips were added, rented to fishermen for a small sum to supplement the meager income. The river also resisted change. The waters rose, the waters fell, the channel deepened, the channel narrowed, sandbars mushroomed overnight, spawned by the mother dredges that kept the channel cleared for barge traffic. Season after season the river continued its sojourn to the Gulf of Mexico, its dark expanse often overrunning the banks until flood waters surrounded the bait house. Ropes were strung from tree to porch and the fishermen stood up in their boats and pulled their way along the rope to reach the bait house and the beer. Sunday afternoon drivers gathered at the river and the people talked of nothing else but the rising and falling of the muddy water, and how the dam would change everything, for better or worse.

It crossed Buford Shypes mind briefly that morning as he loaded his boat, that there was too much hullabaloo over something the little man had no say-so in what so ever. It didn't matter what they did. The river would go on forever, putting on a different face, posing new threats and offering new challenges. Didn't matter a he-haint in hell! He'd just go on about his business, doing what he always did, and they'd be asking where ole' Buford caught that big one, and what bait was he using, and he'd tell 'em some lie, just to satisfy 'em, and go on and laugh to himself—cause if there was fish and game to be had on this river, he could find it. They could snicker all they wanted behind his back, but when they wanted know-how, here they'd come, back to ole' Buford. There just weren't no mistaking who was king on this hill, even if he was just a swamp rat. . .just a swamp rat, but a dammed good one!

Buford stepped back into the bait house for the container of wigglers on the counter. He slapped a six-pack of Bud out of the cooler, grabbed a pack of soda crackers and a can of potted meat and slammed them down on the counter, right beside where Jesse Colter was standing, his little weasel face wedged in the group of fishermen lined up for business.

"Ring 'er up," Buford said loudly, staring hard at the back of Jesse's head.

Jesse turned and nodded, then turned away, but not fast enough for Buford to miss the look of disdain in Jesse's eyes.

"Wasting your time buying flies for fly fishing," Buford said to the back of Jesse's head, "ain't no bass biting right now."

"I appreciate your concern, Mr. Shypes, though I didn't ask for your help, and besides, the fishing forecast disagrees with you."

"Okay," Buford drawled, "all I can do is offer my expert opinion. You yankees don't know nothing about this river, ain't like you fishin' all the time neither, too busy making all that money in the grocer business, getting rich."

"Last time I heard, free enterprise was commendable, aside from being honest, hard work which a lot of you rednecks shy away from!" Jesse stopped. His face turned crimson, clear to the top of his bald head as he realized what he had said. He had gone too far! He looked like he wanted to run.

Conversation stopped along the counter as the fellows turned and stared hard at Jesse. Eyebrows raised and the silence got so thick you could feel the weight of it. Three of the men backed away from the bar and formed a semi-circle next to Jesse. One of the men popped bubble gum, right next to Jesse's ear. He didn't even flinch, but the red began to drain from his face.

Jesse swallowed, then looked to the clerk behind the counter for empathy. His eyes pleaded. The man just smiled, a real slick smile, and stepped backward, one step.

Buford laughed, a full belly laugh, rich and resounding in the small room. The men relaxed. Buford placed one hand on a quivering Jesse's shoulder, pushing his face right up next to Jesse's. "Tell you what, Mr. Jesse," Buford said, his voice soft as a kitten, drawled out for effect, "if you can't catch a decent mess of bass, why you come see ole' Buford, and this little redneck will take you where you can catch 'em, and if you still can't, you can poach you an ole' gator, that is, if one don't catch you first!"

The men broke into laughter, tensions eased, and the bait house became a hub of conversation again. Jesse shuffled toward the door, stumbling in his haste to make his exit.

"Hey, Jesse, you forgot your change!"

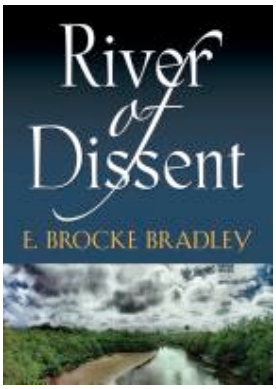
Jesse waved it aside. The screen door banged shut behind him.

A man slapped Buford on the back. "Well, where's that sidekick of yours? Lonny ain't fishing with you today?"

"Reckon that little wife of his has got him corralled this time. It's hell, ain't it? Man's life ain't his own after he gives it to a woman." Buford grabbed his sack off the counter and headed out the door.

Damn! He felt good! Old Jesse was shaking in his boots! Bet he about crapped his pants! Nothing was more fun than stirring up that damn yankee. But one of these days that son-of-a-bitch was going too far. . . .

Within minutes Buford started his boat motor and turned the bow upstream toward the first slough. He forgot Jesse, he forgot that his old Mustang was skipping and blowing smoke, he left all his concerns behind. The peace and beauty of the river washed over him in a soothing flood of contentment. This was it, what more could any man ask for—God! He loved this river, this land. His eyes misted, he cleared his throat and looked around, then savagely slammed the throttle forward, letting one arm dangle overboard in the fierce spray of cold water. Dammit, Lonny, you sons-of-a-bitch, where are you, you oughta' be here. . . woman ain't worth it, no woman ain't worth it. . . He just grinned and grinned to himself.



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