

Return to Freedom

by Alec Clayton

Excerpt from opening chapter

Storms were not uncommon in Freedom. There had been half a dozen flash floods during Malcolm's life, and they had felt the fury of Camille and Katrina and some lesser hurricanes. The early morning sky that day looked to have been painted by Matisse or Derain. It was streaked with a wash of muted pink at the horizon that bled upward into a strange greenish glow, a momentary lull in the rain that had been intermittent for three days and steady for at least twenty-four hours.

Eight miles north of town in his room in the rundown Bateman Motor Court Sonny Staples was dead to the world. If he had been awake to see the strangely colored sky he would have fallen down on his knees and prayed to Sweet Jesus saying, "Lift me up, oh Lord, to my heavenly reward," because to Sonny any strange weather phenomenon was a sign the rapture was at hand. Being pretty darn sure he would be among the blessed when the rapture came, Sonny was anxious for its arrival. But Sonny was not awake that morning. He had got himself stewed stupid the night before and was sleeping as heavily as a bear in winter. That would soon come to an end, however. Hung over or not, storm coming or not, he had promised to work his church-sponsored free coffee service at the rest stop north of Freedom that morning. It was six-thirty. His alarm was set for eight.

To Malcolm Ashton, who was awake and looking out to the north through the rain-streaked window of his trailer home, it was as if the whole world were radioactive. The barometric pressure made him feel like his insides were going to explode. He was pretty sure there wasn't any damn rapture coming, because he didn't believe in the end times or heaven or hell or a god in heaven; although he did believe in the teachings, if not the divinity, of the man called Jesus. He was pretty sure that what was coming was a hurricane. He knew because Weatherman Donny had been talking about it almost non-stop for two days on Channel 7.

Even that early and even with wind off the Gulf and the constant rain, the thermometer outside his trailer registered in the eighties. Three miles to the south and east of the Ashton's mobile home a fierce wind blew off Little Bay and flattened the grasses on the shores of Walker Cove. Along the nearby coastal waters from Pascagoula to Bay St. Louis shrimpers were busy securing their boats. The wind made landfall and picked up speed as it rushed up Liberty Street where it was funneled between the rival high schools, Booker T on the left and Freedom High on the right. Already an inch of water covered the surface of the football field. The wind swept downward and hydroplaned across the wet grass and then rose against the press box on the west side bleachers and ripped off the cloth banner that said "Revival Meeting Sept. 1 at 10 a.m." The banner flew across the gym and slapped upside-down on the wall of the Booker T cafeteria. Another mile and a half farther to the northeast the weeping willow outside Malcolm and Bitsey Ashton's ratty little trailer home was dancing to a frantic rhythm. Rain pounded the metal side of the trailer in a solid sideways sheet. And then it slacked off, but only slightly.

Bitsey had finally gone back to bed at four o'clock that morning and was now fast asleep. Malcolm pushed himself up to sit on the edge of the bed and felt along the floor with his bare

feet for the slippers he remembered leaving there when he went to bed. The phone rang. He picked up the receiver and mumbled, "Hello."

It was his boss, Fred Dalton, calling from the Piggly Wiggly. "Ain't no use a coming in this morning. We ain't gonna open up. Bubbles and Sparkles have done hightailed it out of town, and I reckon you and yours better do the same while the getting's good."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm gonna batten down the hatches."

"Then I'll help you." He was now standing next to the beatup old easy chair, but he hadn't sat down. He stretched the phone cord over to the bed to get down on his knees and look under the bed for his slippers.

"Ain't no need for you to come in," Fred said, but Malcolm said, "Ain't no need for you to do it all by your lonesome neither."

Bitsey stirred awake when the phone rang. She pushed herself up and adjusted her pillow and asked, just as Malcolm hung up, "Was that Fred?"

"Yep."

"What'd he want?"

"Said he needs me early. Just gonna be me and him this morning."

"That man's a slave driver. It's bad enough that he wants you to work at all on a day like this. Ain't suitable for man nor beast out there. I bet that snooty bitch Marybeth ain't coming in today and not that other kid neither."

Malcolm reached far under the bed to retrieve his slippers.