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147,076 words

Historical Fiction/Multicultural  
Setting: Los Angeles (1904-1910)

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Book One

*A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers.*

*Genesis 2:10*

### Chapter One

LOS ANGELES: JULY, 1904

Fred Eaton had *never* had a million-dollar idea as huge as this one. It seemed so simple. He marveled he had been the first to think of it. It was obvious Los Angeles would soon run out of water. And so he'd come up with a scheme to bring a river from up north down to Los Angeles, by gravity, to end the drought forever.

Eaton stared beyond the curled-up tiles of desiccated clay along a parched Los Angeles River bottom bare from lack of rain. From his perch next to the railing atop Aliso Street's old bridge, he peered down at the drillers in the riverbed.

Perspiration soaked his brow, salting the nose clip on his wire-rim *pince-nez* glasses. He mopped them clean, using a fresh-pressed cotton handkerchief. His throat felt dry, but sweat dampened the back of his silk shirt. The pounding of their cable-tool rig echoed through the

morning.

Years of drought had dried the former willow thickets into kindling. West of the river stood Los Angeles, a town needing a shower to wash accumulated soot and grime off sunbaked wooden tenements which rose from dusty streets to house a flood of new arrivals. Daily they came on the long trains from the Midwest, seeking their fortunes. Since 1900, nearly one-hundred thousand immigrants had shown up, needing work. The population of Los Angeles had doubled, driving down wages to where few workers could earn a decent living.

Eaton made out a pair of twins working the drilling rig below. He felt sorry for those well drillers. He knew how hard they toiled. He knew the risks they took, felt cruel, but nonetheless prayed for another new dry hole. He might be wiser not to pitch a crazy promise to Mulholland, but a dream gnawed at Fred Eaton. He needed a second chance at honor, a chance he'd lose should any well drillers strike water.

A trolley rumbling behind him shook the bridge beneath his feet. He checked his pocket watch, read ten a.m., two hours before his lunch with William Mulholland. Nerves in his belly fired. If he sold his plan to Mulholland, Los Angeles might never face a water shortage again. Problem was convincing somebody to build 230 miles of pipeline to a city with no money and no water. The Owens River promised water for *ten cities* L.A.'s size. If only Mulholland might listen. Eaton *had to* convince Mulholland for his plan and L.A.'s populace to have a fighting chance.

It was time to head downtown. Eaton pocketed his watch. He ambled back along Aliso Street. He'd been Mulholland's mentor years ago, and so he knew how hard it was to raise the funds for public works. Yet he somehow had to pique Mulholland's interest.

He walked faster. He'd made another crazy promise—to quit drinking, after Helen had

divorced him and moved east to New York City. But Eaton craved some liquid courage before jousting with Mulholland. He marched through louvered doors beneath the Angelus Hotel into the Westlake Room, two blocks southeast of L.A. City Hall, or as the barkeeper, Barleycorn Johnny Wallis, called it, “City Hell.”

#

On his way to lunch with Mulholland, fortified with whiskey, Eaton staggered from the Westlake Room. The sun glared in his eyes. He made his way past dusty carriages that rattled across the cobblestones on Broadway. Horses veered aside to dodge a noisy motorcar. A block north of City Hall, he saw the Los Angeles Times Building, a four-story brick edifice the natives called “The Fortress.”

He heard shrieking. “¡*Agua!* Water!”

From the *Los Angeles Times* print shop, a girl careened straight toward him. Her left hand was *on fire*.

He stopped and gulped, let out a gasp, felt like he’d swallowed broken glass.

Her burning flesh sizzled and stank. Her face twisted in agony. Her screams bounced off the brickwork.

“¡*Aguaaaa!*” she moaned.

Eaton recoiled, glanced at his pocket watch. He was seven minutes late. He needed his wits to meet with Mulholland. Those wits were drowning now in liquor. He ambled toward Ink Alley, doing his best to appear sober and to hide his mounting horror.

Then he glanced into her eyes.

The woman’s gaze was pinched in pain. She knelt beside him at the roadside in hot gravel stuck to road tar on her worn dungaree knee-patches. She stabbed her steaming fist into

the half-full, putrid *zanja*, the sewage ditch that wasted beside Ink Alley.

Crowds surrounded her, murmuring and elbowing to see.

“*¡Mi mano!* My hand!” Her cries echoed off windows steamed opaque from sweating workers. The L.A. sun at noon blazed blowtorch bright. “*¡Mis dedos!* My fingers!” Her echoes fell in pitch. She slurred her words and shut her eyes as if to block out all her agony.

Pinkertons wagged pistols, herding workers back to their jobs inside the print shop.

Fred Eaton bit his lip. Dug for his wits. *Good Lord, somebody help her.* Liquor buzzed through Eaton’s brain. He listened for an ambulance wagon.

No wagons were coming.

The woman wept alone. “*Ayudame.* Please, help me.”

Eaton saw she’d be quite pretty if her face weren’t wrenched in pain. He re-straightened his *pince-nez* glasses on his nose. Should he—?

“HELP ME!”

He stumbled past the picket lines and Pinkertons. Bending over, he touched the shoulder of her shirtwaist.

“Tell me your name, ma’am. I’m Fred Eaton, former mayor of Los Angeles.”

Her hair, blacker than chicory, clustered rose-like in thick curls around her deep brown Spanish eyes, eyes retreating now in terror. “*Me llama Linda Alvarado.*” She lifted up her scalded fingers whose stench reminded Eaton of the smell of burning meat.

Linda’s fingertips were charred so black the flesh now fell away.

Eaton shriveled inside his whiskey-scented suit coat.

Her shoulders shook like steam-hammers beneath his quavering touch.

A trained engineer, he had no choice but to improvise. He bandaged Linda’s hand in

newsprint using stacks of papers piled outside the print shop and secured them to her wrist using his ribbon tie. “*Señorita Linda*,” Eaton said, “You’ll need a doctor.”

She blinked in fear. “*No tenemos mas dinero*. No more money.”

The rumble of a trolley car approached them from Aliso Street. He draped her in his suit coat. He pressed a silver dollar into the hand that wasn’t damaged and forced a smile to offer courage. Paying her fare, he helped support her as she climbed onto the trolley.

He watched her streetcar rumble east along Aliso Street.

The liquor fog had now been seared from Eaton’s brain.

He glanced down at his pocket watch. *Damn! He’d stood up Mulholland*. He’d just squandered his appointment with the Water Works superintendent and left his suit coat on that trolley. Could he beg for one more chance to sell his aqueduct idea? He hated groveling. He’d have to, nonetheless.

This wasn’t the Los Angeles Fred Eaton remembered. There’d been a time there’d been no Pinkertons, when workers had shared dignity, before General Otis had organized his new cartel, the M&M, the alliance called the “Merchants and Manufacturers.” Their self-made kings now forced the workers of Los Angeles into serfdom.

The terror he had seen in Linda’s eyes had spoken volumes.

#

Rumbling east across the waterless *Rio de Los Angeles*, the Aliso Street Trolley pounded Linda’s hips and spine. Bench splinters poked her dungarees. The conductor yanked his lever, and wheels groaned against iron rails in ways that Linda didn’t dare. Notwithstanding her excruciating pain, she sat expressionless. She bit her lip and sucked in both her cheeks to ward away her agony. The trolley jerked. She heard a giggle and saw schoolgirls pointing toward her.

Brown fluid from her bandage soiled her brand new cotton blouse, her *favorite* blouse, the one that Oscar liked. She tried to think of Oscar, but pain crawling up her arm came front-and-center.

“Eeeeeew!” *Anglo* girls curled up their noses and slid away from her. The trolley groaned and stopped. Their group exited the streetcar. They turned to stare, the way rude people gawk at amputees and freaks. The girls’ gaping pink lips exposed their too-sharp perfect teeth.

Linda shuddered. She swallowed back her pain.

She pulled her hand into the sleeve of the man’s coat, making her look as if she *were* an amputee, a thought that nudged her toward faintness. Before today, she’d found her share of men’s attention at *paseos*. Oscar had bragged about her looks. *What had those girls seen?* Something had changed. In one brief instant she had tripped over the foundry plates, plunged half of her left hand into the ladle of molten lead used to pour plates to print *The Times*. *Had her mistake made her a monster?*

Her left side throbbed. More nausea. Her head spun. Linda’s trolley jerked and started. She was alone and somewhere new.

Her left hand had gone numb. Her right hand touched its bandage. Something missing.

In panic, she tore the paper from her hand.

Linda didn’t want to see.

Except she looked...

...And wanted to scream in revulsion and rewrap her hand and hide it. No fingernails. No flesh on bone stubs charred beyond the knuckles.

*¡Ay Dios mío! God! My fingers. My engagement ring. Oscar asked me for my hand. With chunks of my hand—with his ring missing, will he...?*

She shut her eyes. Fought back the agony. *Never cry in front of Anglos.*

*Will he...?*

She was weaker now. Too frail to even think. She longed to hide, to cower beneath her *Californio* pride, which felt sooooo much like fear, and masked *la vergüenza*, the shame of her proud Alvarado family's fall from grace. They'd once been *dons* and *doñas*, honored throughout both Californias. Long ago, her *bisabuelo* Juan had governed California. That had ended after *la Invasion de 1846*, when *Norteamerica* had annexed all of *Alta California*. Still her family fought to hang onto what honor they still had. *Mama* had claimed they were *hidalgos*. "*Hijos de algo*," she'd told Linda on her deathbed. "Don't forget we are the heirs of *Don Quixote* in a land in which Cervantes is unheard of," she had whispered. We must act chivalrous and speak like the nobility we are.

Linda'd struggled through two pages of *Don Quixote* before quitting. She'd expected him to be a better knight.

Above her, sparks snapped from the pantograph as the trolley lumbered east. No coworkers at the *Los Angeles Times* had even helped her, just some tall whiskey-breathed stranger with those European eyeglasses. Pain stabbed up her forearms. She pulsed with agony. Her field of vision blurred.

All of her thoughts scattered to darkness.

#

Every slam of bare steel against rock vibrated the ground, and jarred Gabriel Alvarado's spine. Overhead on the drill rig, the crown-sheave pulley groaned. The drill string rose and gleamed in moonlight. The long spud beam released. The drill tools dropped and echoed from their hole beneath the earth. More rock, sandstone, and cobbles fractured somewhere



underground. Gabriel rose from his crooked wooden stepstool by the steam boiler, again swallowing regret he'd cut his school years short for *this*.

He covered up his lantern. His brother and Papa were still asleep, wrapped liked *burritos* in their bedrolls fifty feet south of the jobsite. He finger-combed his jet-black hair, tucked his britches into work boots, and fought to stay awake. He bit his lip to calm his nerves and stared alone across the parched clay of the Los Angeles River bed.

From the first hour they had all guyed up the drill rig in the river bottom, Gabriel'd had a premonition this well job might go bust. He hadn't told Papa. Not that Papa ever really listened. Fears gnawed at Gabriel's stomach. He grabbed a fistful of crushed rock out of the cuttings pile mounding up adjacent to the rig. No moisture. Cuttings so hot and dry they almost felt like furnace slag. A dry hole, Gabriel feared. Papa couldn't afford another when the City paid no money for dry holes.

Bone-tired, Gabriel longed for sleep. He'd nodded off an hour ago, but the pounding of the drilling rig had jarred him back awake. He'd had his second favorite dream, the one where he found the hidden door in Papa's house, leading to extra rooms with real wooden floors. Attics, basements, and huge closets sat unoccupied and eager for Gabriel and his family to move into their new space. It almost topped his favorite dream, where welding rods pointed him to water. He'd seen this done. When he'd been twelve, one when no one was around, he'd bent some welding rods to try it, and the welding rods had worked.

They'd spread like wings on a butterfly when Gabriel had wandered close to water. He'd rejoiced, knowing he'd had this secret power. But of late it had stopped working. *Perhaps*, he thought, *I've used my magic up, or maybe there just isn't any water anymore.*

He'd given up his schooling to spend all-nighters running drill engines and guarding old

equipment. This was *not* the life he wanted. His schoolteacher's contempt replayed each morning in his mind. That man told all Gabriel's classmates how he'd never amount to beans. "*Just a rig-monkey.*" Gabriel still could feel his face burn at the memory. "*A lower-class, sweat-stained, greaser-spic rig-monkey who has no right to even be in Anglo schools.*"

*Anglo* girls he still had crushes on had giggled at the comment, and he'd blushed a deeper crimson than his tattered flannel shirt. He still hadn't found a way to shove the image from his mind. He told himself hard work would someday overcome their hatred. Easy to say, and he was trying to believe it.

Exhausted, Gabriel staggered from the rig back to their camp. At least nursing the boiler calmed his nerves. Thirty feet away, Gabriel's twin brother yawned. *Didn't Miguel ever get worried over Papa's awful luck?*

Papa never spoke about what happened with the banks. Their family had always been dirt poor, but never *so* deeply in debt. Gabriel stuffed his anger, stuffed it deeper than the drill string. He felt it rumble down inside him when he thought of the word, "greaser." He said "yes sir," and "no sir," to bankers who loathed his family. If hard work mattered, his whole family would be J. P. Morgan rich. What was it they taught *Anglos* in their fancy public schools? Was there some magic word to force people to pay you?

He didn't know. He just showed up, shut up, and worked sixteen-hour days, wondering why this growing city couldn't reward hard-working families. Today was both twins' fourteenth birthday. Miguel surely had to know. Perhaps he stayed in bed on-purpose, knowing their birthdays were "unlucky."

Gabriel kicked some rock flakes from the cuttings pile.

He rolled Papa's last barrel of water to the boiler. He twisted open the valve to add more

liquid to the reservoir. The hose spewed out hot steam. The steam engine whined louder. He touched fresh drill cuttings. *Too hot!* A bad sign.

Dawn ratcheted the sun above L.A.'s eastern horizon. The Cudahy Packing Plant stench wafted downriver from the rail yards. High above the riverbed, shiny carriages and motorcars on the *Calle Aliso* viaduct carried *Anglos* to their day jobs.

A stranger near the railing scribbled something onto his clipboard. *Why did he keep watching them? Who was he?*

Gabriel's gut tightened.

The drill rig groaned above and cast its first long morning shadow. With sunrise, fading letters on the firebox appeared, coated with so much carbon, flaked in so many places that the stranger on the viaduct would never know what words the letters had once spelled, years ago when Papa still had dreams and money:

LUÍS ALVARADO AND SONS

WELL DRILLERS.

Today, the age-dimmed letters were as dull as Papa's eyes, no longer new, betraying bitter disappointment and despair.

Papa stumbled from his bedroll, straightening the straw *sombrero* that sagged above his big sad silver moustache. He glowered at the stranger on the bridge, watching them work, before stumbling toward Gabriel and touching the steel rope. "Is virgin cable," he told Gabriel. He shook his head and spat. "She is shiny as a new barbershop razor. And dry cuttings." His head bowed. "I have never drilled so deep."

Miguel looked up, frowned, and retracted his head further beneath his blanket.

Gabriel shivered, hoisting his britches. Only thirty feet of drill cable remained up on its spool. The boiler swallowed their last water.

Papa had no money.

Gabriel had seen the notices.

If this well didn't strike water, they were broke.

#

Once more atop the viaduct, Fred Eaton squinted against the sunrise, studying the well drillers below. The rig's dark outline emerged from night the same way it had yesterday, before he'd gotten drunk and found the woman in Ink Alley. Eaton gazed upriver past wheat fields without wheat, cattle pens without cattle, and beyond the bone-white sycamores to the sunburnt clumps of buckwheat dotting dusty-bleak chaparral hills.

To sell his aqueduct idea, Eaton had to be the first to know if Mulholland's new well happened to turn up any water. Each dry hole helped Eaton's case. He knew Mulholland was stubborn. It almost hurt seeing that poor Mexican family break their backs under a contract that shifted all the risk of dry holes onto contractors, because the City had more money than the workers to hire attorneys.

Rock-dust coated the drillers. Those two boys had to be twins, although the one that they called Gabriel looked as skinny as their cable wire. The other boy was huskier, but both had scrappy faces. Eaton propped his notebook on the railing and observed.

From his vest, he yanked a fountain pen, a gift from his ex-wife the year before she had divorced him. He scribbled onto his pad.

*“Dearest Helen, I’m disturbed by what is happening in Los Angeles. So troubled I’ve decided to set Jack Daniels aside.”*

Eaton collected his thoughts. Fewer thoughts collected as he neared fifty. He’d always heard that while a young man dreamed of greatness, an older man was lucky to recall one act of goodness that might even be remembered by his family if he still had one. Eaton needed to mend fences, to patch things up with Helen. Wooing her back might be expensive, and he knew that he would have to give up drinking. He was aware he’d started drinking for good reason. But he might get a second chance if he could shake off all the anger that had made him a saloon dandy to chloroform his pain.

Born in old Los Angeles in 1855, Eaton had started his career with the Los Angeles Water Works. He’d then studied engineering at Santa Clara University, which had led to his being elected L.A.’s city engineer, and then the mayor. He’d laid out Central Park, Elysian Park, and both Westlake and Eastlake Parks. He’d laid out city sewer outfalls running clear out to the sea. But never in his 49 years of living in Los Angeles had wells drilled in the bottom of the river come up dry.

Until today. It was different now. His town was drier than the remnants of his soul. He swatted gnats. Warm winds fluttered the stationery on his clipboard, pulling his attention back to Helen. What should he say? The usual California Club socialite gossip was too trite to pass along when years of drought still parched his city. He could write about their debutantes and garden tours later, but not when friends were being forced to sell off horses to pay off debts on their dead orchards and their fields of withering crops.

He asked Helen of her health, of her life back in New York, and decided, for a change, to

share the fears that grew inside him.

*“Both the river and the city I remember are long gone. The old California has been swallowed up by immigrants who also swallow up our water.”*

Eaton scribbled faster.

*“Those from the East like to pretend they bring Los Angeles their status while in truth the only thing they bring is greed.*

*“I regret, as mayor, I courted them. The proud Ninth Street elite disdain us sons of Forty-niners, much as they look down on all laborers. The pain caused by their contempt I saw reflected in the eyes of the young woman who yesterday burned off three fingertips downtown.”*

The woman’s gaze had boiled with such fear and sad despair. He’d detected a *Californio* lineage from her dark *mestizo* eyes. Why did Yankees so despise those who had once owned California, the old *vaqueros*, rugged as the live oaks that had once cluttered their valleys? He recalled the ancient cattle ranchers riding from the Old Verdugo Ranch to “Eaton Canyon” to see Judge Eaton, his aging father. He remembered dividing sticky tangerines picked from the orchards among children whose brown faces had gleamed as bright as summer sunshine. At dusk, the children had waved from their fiesta-colored carts behind their silver-harnessed horses with manes fluttering behind, galloping home across the sagebrush-scented fields.

He reached down for his whiskey flask, recalled he’d left it home, perhaps for keeps, and

continued with his letter:

*“The Ink Alley girl’s skin was bronzed like an acorn, so exactly I expected she bore the heart of an oak within. Her eyes reminded me of the awful drought of Eighteen sixty-four, of eyes of cows bleating on desiccated hills....”*

Eaton lifted up his pen. Memories of *el verano de las moscas*, the “summer of flies,” returned to haunt him, the cattle’s ribcages poking against brown-paper-bag skins, their abandoned bawling calves, leather reeking in the fields. With a glut of cattle carcasses, no men would pay for hides. The vulture bankers then foreclosed, removing titles from their vaults, refusing credit, and then writing in their *own* names on the ranch deeds.

He couldn’t write Helen of such memories. He ripped the previous page out of his letter. Helen always had insisted her surroundings must be cheerful. She hid behind society like he hid behind his whiskey. Each had their chosen their own tonic.

Yet Eaton missed her.

He’d write Helen a happy note tomorrow.

He balled the letter in his fist. His tongue scraped on his lips. He spat in the direction of the riverbed’s skeletal willows. They reminded him of better days, before Helen divorced him. By the *Río de Los Angeles*, the “River of the Angels,” their children had chased dragonflies on warm Saturday picnics. Once, they had skimmed rocks across the algae-covered waters while Helen had laughed aloud and fried up fresh trout on the beach. Their five children were grown. Helen had moved east to New York, and Eaton hated living alone. His river *also* had gone dry.

He wondered whether Helen had even read last Sunday’s letter. How many letters would

he write before she answered? He scanned the newspapers he'd bought at daybreak. On the morning following her injury, neither *The Times* nor *The Herald* printed news of "Linda's" accident.

This *wasn't* the Los Angeles he remembered.

#



Chapter Two

LOS ANGELES: JULY, 1904

Linda fretted, despite the pain now pulsing up and down her body.

Papa had not come home again last night.

She knew he must work hard, but Linda worried for his health and also worried what might happen when he learned about her fingers. She'd always had to be the strong one ever since Mama had died and left an emptiness in Linda no one else could ever fill. Linda had to appear solid, but there was nothing left inside her. She swallowed back her tears, steeled her chin and faced the day.

She shivered beside her sister in their Soto Street *adobe*. Its bare pine table pressed against her elbows. Her knuckles hovered beneath ice chunks in their rusty iron pot. The ache returned to Linda's puffy fingers.

Her dread solidified. Dirty walls closed in with each hour indoors. Her injury put her earning power in peril with missing fingers.

Linda's sixteen-year-old sister fetched some more ice from their ice box.

"How will we cook, Luz," Linda asked, "if I can't remove my hand out of our cooking pot?"

Luz glared back. "Until your swelling passes, all we have is bread." The glare felt colder

than the ice chips freezing Linda's throbbing fingers. Somehow Luz always looked so somber, despite her hourglass proportions and thick brown hair pinned like a Gibson Girl's in clouds atop her brow. Linda masked her own resentment. Their family had no money, but Luz always found a way to buy herself more fancy clothing or charm some boy to buy her baubles to adorn her.

Linda shut her eyes and shook her head.

She did *not* want Luz's bread, and had no use for Luz's pity. She *knew* her sister's pity never lasted. If Luz could care, perhaps she'd help to raise their two motherless brothers, instead of focusing on herself, her closet full of homemade dresses, and her boxes full of makeup, ribbons, necklaces, and earrings. Didn't Luz know only actresses and prostitutes wore makeup?

Linda longed to see the day when Oscar came back from his homestead, the day he'd free her from this hovel with its filthy crumbling walls. Their *adobe* felt a lot more like a storage shed for clutter than her home. Here, she felt shackled to her suffocating family, with no mother, no wife to run the household, only her, since she'd been nine when *Tia Consuela*, their *niñera* had run off, and had left Linda to raise her brothers and her sister by herself.

"Our bread is stale, too coarse for my burnt fingers, if you care, Luz."

"Linda, stop it."

"What do you know about my pain? Your life is easy." Linda glanced at Luz's delicate soft hands and swallowed envy.

Strolling to the cupboard, Luz grabbed a tomato. She plopped it beside her sister. "Try this."

Linda shoved the fruit aside. She stared down at her wrist. The wound beneath the water engulfed her. In her nineteen years of life, she had never known such pain. With each surge, her anguish overflowed. Itching burned below her wrist. An ache wicked up her forearm, pounding

past her elbow until its torment re-erupted. She locked her teeth to keep from panting, an old habit, hiding misery from her trio of younger siblings. Muscles hardened, and sweat washed Linda's forehead.

The pain receded, sucked into some whirlpool outside her, leaving her numb, save the soreness where her fingertips were missing.

When she could think again, she said, "A raw tomato, is that my breakfast then?"

"I was only trying to help, Linda."

"Then *cook* for a change, Luz. Make some *tortillas*."

"I can't cook the way you do."

"*You* never try. You just sew dresses for yourself."

Luz hid her face. "I wish...."

"*You wish?*"

Luz made a face and turned away. "I wish you'd died instead of Mama. Then I wouldn't have to listen to you complain you need *tortillas*." In tears, she made her way out the back door.

It slammed behind her.

Longing rose in Linda. Mama, dead for fourteen years, dead since Linda had been a little girl of five. How different life might be if fever hadn't taken Mama. "Wishing gets us nothing, *hermanita*," Linda murmured. "Only misery."

Luz walked back inside and tilted her chin. Her eyes glittered, perhaps with hatred, perhaps covering her hurt. She glared. Stuck out her tongue.

In anguish, Linda sighed. No matter how hard Linda tried, her little sister, Luz, did not respect her. And Luz was petulant and full of contradictions, pretending to be religious when all she cared about were boys and how to make them pay attention to her looks.

Linda glared at Luz. “Is that all you have to say?”

“Linda, who cares what women say? The men won’t even let us vote. You have to humor them, and charm them like the snakes most of them are. Are the men at the *paseos* hypnotized by your opinions?”

“Oscar listens to me.”

Luz stared at Linda and slowly shook her head. “You really think so? You think a man will ever value your opinion? Especially Oscar, who finished high school and even spent a year in Normal School before our country sent him off to fight the Spanish.”

Linda looked down at her hand and swallowed anguish.

That hated brass crucifix dangled between her sister’s breasts, almost as if her little Jesus had just popped out for a visit. Luz offered up a blank expression, matching the brass face on her crucifix, as if neither one dared vocalize why Linda deserved punishment. Linda yearned to yank brass Jesus off his chain....

...And melt him down.

The throbs returned as the muscles tightened Linda’s aching forearms. She cried out and doubled over. The backs of her eyes blackened, and she was sure she was about to faint and felt it was a mercy.

Luz touched her sister’s wrist. “Go lie down, Linda,” she said.

Linda shook her head.

Luz lifted Linda’s hand.

“What were you looking at?” Linda glared at Luz.

Luz and little Jesus studied the tingling black blisters. Fluid sacs swelled like berries where Linda’s fingertips had been.

“You’ll lose your fingertips,” cried Luz, giving a shudder, using a tone of voice that seemed to be pretending like she cared.

It wasn’t Luz’s fault. Hating her was unfair. “*Lo siento*. I’m sorry, *hermanita*, pain makes me mean.” Linda replied. “Boil us some rice. Can you do that? *¿Por favor?* Use the rusty pot out in the porch that’s full of onions.”

“*Sí*.” Looking grateful now for Linda’s kinder tone, Luz hurried out the kitchen door and returned, minutes later, with a banged-up iron pot. She poured water from the crock. “How much rice?” Luz called.

“Fill the steel cup.” Linda had to watch, concerned that Luz might burn the rice if unattended.

In moments alone, fear numbed Linda’s mind much as the ice now numbed her fingers. If she stayed home, she knew *The L. A. Times* would fire her. She had to see her boss, or lose not only her fingertips, but her *job*, and all the workers at *The Times* she called her friends.

And that *Times* paycheck was Linda’s only breath of dignity and freedom—and sometimes the only source of food to feed her family. Until Oscar came to marry her, she didn’t dare to lose it.

She hated working. But *not* working was far worse.

#

Gabriel kicked the earth. Plumes of dust rose through the sunrays, specks sparkling as they drifted toward the farms of Cahuenga Pass. He glanced toward the drilling rig as Papa stood beside it. Beneath layers of sweat, concern was etched on Papa’s brow. A dry hole meant the City wouldn’t be paying for this well, even though the site had been picked out by William Mulholland. Gabriel knew Papa’s “unlucky streak,” regardless of its cause, was a crime the local

banks could not forgive.

“Eight more feet,” Papa called. “It’s all the cable we have left.”

Gabriel’s heart sank. Another dry hole. He forced himself to grin. He wanted to appear *macho* like Miguel. With no money and no water, how many weeks could Papa last before the Alvarado family was forced out of their home to find their fortunes on L.A.’s dusty *calles*?

Shadows zigzagged through the boulders and the clumps of dried up dandelions that poked through arid cracks in thirsty clay. Breezes whisked downriver past the Southern Pacific shops. There was that stranger up on the bridge again. Gabriel made out the man who’d watched him and his brother work the drilling rig just yesterday. He took notes again today, and Gabriel wondered why. The water Mr. Mulholland had promised they would find beneath the river wasn’t anywhere around.

“*Está seco,*” Papa said. “Our hole is dry.” He gave a shrug. He nibbled his cracked lips with broken teeth. His mouth, his gray moustache, and his sagging straw *sombrero* curled into three parallel frowns.

“I’ll go and buy more cable,” said Miguel.

“With what?” said Papa, stuffing his fists into a pair of empty pockets and spitting loudly.

“*No tenemos mas dinero.*”

Miguel looked as if he wished no one had spoken and glared at Gabriel.

Gabriel could only shut his eyes.

#

After treating Linda’s burns with salves of aloe and *nopal*, the *curandera* had ordered Linda to treat her pain by drinking laudanum. Linda was supposed to stay at home, but staying home was not an option. She had to go Downtown to save her job, her independence. General

Otis, *The L.A. Times*' owner, did not condone excuses.

Once outside, she felt stronger, although her hand throbbed. She masked the limp where her right leg, shorter than her left, caused Linda to wobble when she walked. She wished the walk Downtown might soothe her. She marched down *La Calle Aliso* toward the Times Building. Her hand ached, but she'd tolerate the pain in exchange for hours of freedom from her selfish, lazy sister.

Along Broadway, the gas-buggies' black rubber tires sprayed oil and grime onto her skirt. She was annoyed, but Linda didn't shake her fist. Far, far too painful. It even hurt to swat the horseflies in the wake of passing motorcars. She swallowed anxiety. She hurt too much to smile. She was late, and today she was afraid.

Throbbing pain gnawed at her knuckles. Perhaps she had been foolish to leave Luz and Luz's ice at the *adobe*. The *curandera* had warned Linda infection might take more flesh, all of her fingers, or worse yet—Linda shuddered—*her whole hand*. She'd heard tales from Spanish War veterans with chewing-gum-like scars folded into holes where arms and legs were supposed to be.

Linda walked faster. If her hands could not be pretty, they'd be useful. She lifted her chin, pulled back her shoulders, forced a smile. She dared not show any fear. Marching toward the Times Building, she nodded to suited Pinkertons guarding iron gates into Ink Alley.

"Hello," she told her foreman.

He stared down at the gravel. He'd never done that. Something was wrong.

"I will heal," Linda told him. "I can soon be back to work." She smiled wider. "I am strong."

He studied her burnt hand and looked away.

He blinked and said, "I'm sorry." He squirted tobacco to the gravel and then stared down at his spit. "Neither General Otis nor Mister Chandler can use you anymore."

"It was an accident." Linda's voice rose. "I was always a good worker. I can still work." She shook her throbbing hand to demonstrate. "I can work, sir."

The foreman squished his spit into the gravel, then stopped and blushed, almost as if she'd caught him squashing real people.

"Was I not always a good worker?" Linda asked. She felt less confident.

"The best," the foreman said. "But the General..." The foreman shook his head and turned away. He neither completed his sentence nor took another glance at Linda as he walked back to the printing shop.

Linda's heart dropped from her throat. She cradled her wrapped hand. She *needed* this job, needed it like air to stay alive. *¡Ay Dios mío! Who will hire me?*

There was nobody to hear her.

Turning, she trudged out onto Second Street, kicking stones, racking her brain for any way to find some work. Fear climbed up her throat, choking her as if she wasn't even good enough to breathe. Where could she earn money? Who would hire damaged goods? All that waited back at home was selfish Luz and her damned ice pot.

#

Eaton straightened his collar. Drenched with sweat, it chafed his neck. He shook his pen, writing a letter he hoped Helen might actually read:

*"Dust covers up the scents of citrus. The heat has silenced all the scrub jays. Our riverbeds have fractured into endless seas of polygons. Without water, all our homesteads and our middle class will vanish. Bankers will claim orchards.*



*Lenders will take vineyards. El verano de las moscas will return.”*

Eaton wrote faster.

*“Unless I sell my plan to redirect the Owens River. I shall drink no whiskey today. My aqueduct will make us rich and will restore us from the scandal Otis caused over my drinking. It will save the middle class who years ago put us in office. I’ll bring L.A. a river. The rank and file need water.”*

Eaton smiled wide. He finished writing with a flourish.

*“And, Helen, I know exactly where to find it.”*

#

Chapter Three

*“No rain since April of 1903 except for 0.46 inches in September. Driest I have ever known.”*

*Private journal entry - Henry O’Melveny, Esq.*

#

LOS ANGELES: JULY, 1904

Atop the viaduct, Fred Eaton shut his notebook. He returned his attention to the well-drillers below. Every clank of steel against rock offered him hope. The well drillers’ misfortune and Mulholland’s newest dry hole just might help Fred Eaton sell his aqueduct idea.

Although it was only seven-thirty, Eaton was confident his hand-chosen successor at the Water Works was already at work. Mulholland, an eager beaver, always showed up to work early. He’d order longer pump shafts and column pipes to deepen wells, add more pump bowls and impellers suspended deep in crusted casings where water once had roared. Flows were less certain as the water levels plummeted. Subdivisions now sprawled from the dry Los Angeles River bed west for miles, out to the fence lines of the farms near the Cahuenga Valley and Hollywood. Eaton had asked himself at least a thousand times, *Why can’t Bill get it through his thick skull that he needs the Owens River?*

The hammering had fallen silent. The cable rig had given up. Eaton heard street noises as

one-hundred-thousand *Angeleños* reawakened. A blacksmith's anvil sang. Eaton wiped his brow and felt the doughy beads of salt and sweat congealing on his knuckles. It was ugly hot already in Los Angeles.

The foreman in the riverbed pulled a slender iron lever, releasing cable from the spud beam on the rig. Cable wound onto its pulley. The steam engine gears whined. Eaton counted the rotations while he glanced down at his pocket-watch. Fifty-seven, fifty-eight pulley revolutions lifted a string of cable, then more cable—and gray dust from the hole. The work engine chugged faster as the cable string grew lighter. *Two-hundred feet*, Eaton figured from the pulley.

The wire rope slowed to a crawl. The drilling tools emerged.

...*And no water*. The foreman spat on metal hot enough to make his spittle sizzle. The rock bit had been bashed into a worthless iron ball. Eaton knew a new bit cost at least a week of wages. In a drought, being a well-driller was a risky line of business.

He wiped his handkerchief on his brow. Those poor drillers had found nothing but rock. He felt the redness on his forehead from his sunburn. When those men's dry holes paid a pittance, how could they make an honest living?

Below, he watched the well drillers dismantling their rig.

Mulholland had only laughed at Eaton's aqueduct plans and had called them a colossal waste of money. He kept insisting that Los Angeles could not afford the funding. *But now he'd drilled a dry hole in the Los Angeles River*.

Maybe now, Bill Mulholland might listen.

#

As vaudeville people might say, it was "show-time."

In his mind, Eaton rehearsed the pitch he planned to give to Mulholland. At Second

Street and Broadway, he tipped the driver of his Hansom cab, swallowed down his nerves while disembarking from his seat. He straightened his ribbon tie, and reminded himself to smile for the next hour. He centered his wool vest, buffed his shoe toes against his pant legs, and tugged his gold watch from his pocket. Eleven-twenty-five a.m. He knew he'd never get a better chance to sell his aqueduct. William Mulholland waited in his office.

Eaton made his way up the stone steps to City Hall. He recalled the way he'd felt during his tenure as L.A.'s mayor. His steps were brisk then, not his battle-weary cadence of today, the walk of a man forced out of office by moguls brokering elections. Eaton threw back his shoulders, willing vigor into his footsteps, and breathed in the confidence of his former days in office

Oak doors swung behind him, and he entered City Hall. The polished quarter-sawn oak floors brought back memories he liked.

"Morning, sir."

Eaton smiled at a clerk and made his way along a corridor, appreciating the varnished scents he recalled from happier times. His footsteps echoed past the Council Chambers, following a hallway through a gallery of portraits of past mayors. He passed his own portrait, "Honorable Fred Eaton, 1898-1900." He glanced at it and grinned, trying to regain his former confidence.

He climbed the stone steps behind the lavatories to the Engineering Office, focusing on Mulholland and rehearsing today's pitch. He turned left at the stair landing, strolling past drafting tables and file cabinets stuffed full of records of artesian wells they'd drilled back in the years when this was Mexico. At the corridor's end, a woman in a red and yellow flower-print pecked keys on a black Underwood typewriter.

She looked up through wire glasses. Her typewriter went silent. “Mister Eaton. What a pleasure.”

Eaton nodded. “Nice to see you,” his chin jerked toward the door. “Mulholland in?”

“Zat Freddy Eaton?” a voice growled from the doorway. A man with eyes that could bore granite stared at Eaton. “Criminy, Mary, I told you to mount the Gatling guns out front and keep this good-for-nothin’ scalawag away.”

Eaton grinned, extending a hand. Mulholland’s handshake could juice apples. Mulholland ushered his former boss into his office.

Mulholland shut the door. “You stood me up,” he said to Eaton.

“A girl was injured at *The Times*.”

“So I heard. She okay? Guess I can’t blame a Good Samaritan.” He gestured Eaton toward a chair. “Siddown, Fred.”

Eaton sat, muffling a short sigh of relief as he reminded himself Mulholland was the same age as himself.

Mulholland rolled up blueprints. “Sorry to hear Helen moved East.” He secured his rolled-up plans using a big red rubber band. “Mighty sorry, Fred. At least now she can’t nag you for your drinkin’.”

“I miss Helen,” said Eaton.

“You make it sound like you still want her.”

“Part of me does.” He stiffened. “But Bill, that isn’t why I’m here.”

Mulholland stuffed his plan roll into a basket by his desk.

Eaton settled into a deep chair lined with soaped cordovan leather and admired the carved lion heads that decorated its arms. His grip tightened around a leonine nose. He studied

Mulholland's clutter. A tripod and Philadelphia rod in candy-cane colors leaned against a glass-front bookcase filled with textbooks on geology, dams, and open-channel flow. The odor of wet boots filled up the room.

Eaton saw the new door to his right and gave a whistle.

"WILLIAM MULHOLLAND," he read aloud through frosted glass,  
"SUPERINTENDENT — LOS ANGELES CITY WATER WORKS."

Mulholland laced his fingers behind his neck and looked away. "Had it etched there just last month to help remind me who I am."

Eaton grinned. "Pretty fancy, Bill. No one etched *my* name on a door, and I was *mayor*."

"You weren't for long," fired back Mulholland. "We all knew Otis would evict you when he got back from the Philippines."

"You were right." Eaton laughed and felt his nervousness choke his belly.

Mulholland sucked on a cigar. It drooped below his moustache like a pump handle. "So just what brings you by?"

Eaton breathed in deep and wiped his glasses over his vest. "You drilled a dry hole, Bill." Eaton scooted forward.

Mulholland's cigar stump sprang to life. "Bad news travels fast."

"A dry hole? Beneath the Los Angeles River?"

Mulholland swiveled in his chair, biting off the cigar tip and spitting it to the ashcan. "Say what's on your mind, Fred."

"I have an idea, Bill."

"I know."

"I need you to check it out for me—as a friend."

Mulholland faced the window, teeth jacking his cigar. His gaze leveled. His mind seemed to be focused somewhere else. He swiveled to face Eaton the way a locomotive on a turntable faced toward its egress at the roundhouse.

“Folks think your ideas are far-fetched, Fred.”

Mulholland was stalling. City money must be tight, or else his Water Commissioners had their own agendas.

“Folks,” Eaton straightened and removed his *pince-nez* glasses “think we can pump water from dry holes, too.” From a side table, he lifted up an engineering scale made from boxwood with six edges on a triangular cross section. He’d hoped this sales pitch might go smoother. “Bill, L.A. needs water. The Water Board listens to you. I came up here to bring you a solution.”

Mulholland rose. He ambled to the window and lifted the sash. Horseshoes and wagon wheels echoed up from Broadway. Scents of factory smoke and horse manure rose up from the pavement. He studied citizens, as if reading their thoughts.

Eaton reached down for his flask. *Where the hell’s Jack Daniels? Put away, dammit.* He rolled the three-edged scale between his palms. His thoughts wandered from lost elections to the injured girl’s burnt fingers, to the driller and his sons working right now to break their rig down. He flipped open his pocket watch. Eleven-forty-five.

“All right, Fred, let’s hear your pitch again.” Mulholland shuffled to his seat. “You get ten minutes.”

Eaton swallowed hard. He eased a breath out to remove any tremor from his voice. He’d memorized the Owens River script, rehearsed responses to any and all possible questions. He’d hoped that Mulholland might listen for a change. But the angle of the Superintendent’s eyebrows reminded Eaton that Mulholland had rejected this pitch so often that Eaton feared William

Mulholland could give the pitch himself. On top of it all, Eaton hated being patronized by somebody he'd taken time to mentor years ago.

Somewhere near the Times Building, a trolley bell was clanging.

Eaton strolled toward the window, slamming it with such force Mulholland jerked. Eaton turned and cleared his throat. "To maximize use of the Los Angeles River," he leaned toward Mulholland, "you've built countless improvements. Elysian Reservoir, Solano Reservoir." Eaton counted on his fingers. "Buena Vista Pumping Plant."

Mulholland's eyes suggested he was listening.

"To replace the river, we've tunneled through bedrock to build collection galleries. We've slapped meters on customers to raise revenue." Thoughts filled Eaton's mind, and he sailed on, giving his pitch. "But for every improvement that brings water, the Chamber of Commerce brings more people. The Otises and the Chandlers, the Shermans and the Huntingtons subdivide land, making Los Angeles grow thirstier."

Mulholland tapped on his cigar. "You've told me nothing I don't know. Moses Sherman and his Water Board are gonna outlaw lawn watering. That gets me through summer, and it's cheap."

"They take away our lawns so Sherman and Chandler's subdivisions can make the drought worse?"

Mulholland sat and puffed on his cigar.

*Let Mulholland think it's his idea.* It was a political trick Eaton had picked up in the mayor's chair. "You're the key to making this whole idea work, Bill. You know every pump and pipeline in L.A."

Mulholland grunted. He gazed across his busy desk.



Eaton lowered his voice. “The system won’t work without you. L.A. trusts you, needs you, Bill, as long as it needs water. But if you *don’t* bring the water....”

Mulholland exhaled a trail of smoke. “As you know, there’s a limit to my budget, Mister Eaton. Wages in Los Angeles are lower than most cities. I’m still paying the bonds off from the purchase of the Los Angeles Water Company assets back in Nineteen-ought-two.”

“I helped broker that deal,” Eaton reminded him.

“I can’t afford another of your damn deals at the moment.”

“That’s it, then. The answer’s no? I didn’t come to argue.” Eaton softened his tone for one last go. “I—came to pick your brain, Bill, about this Owens River possibility, about an aqueduct. You’re the best damn engineer....”

“Cut the flattery.” Mulholland squished out his cigar. “The people of Los Angeles can’t afford it, plain and simple.”

“Wait and see.” Eaton leaned across the desk toward Mulholland. “As it gets drier, they’ll get desperate.”

The tremor in Eaton’s voice betrayed his own desperation.

“We’ll get rain. We always do, Fred.”

Eaton glared, measuring each word. “You haven’t lived in this country as long as I have. I’ve seen dry years you don’t know a thing about.” He slapped the scale against a plan roll. He grabbed his hat and stood.

Mulholland frowned.

“I can show you how to bring a whole new river to save Los Angeles, a river serving two-million people. That’s more people than live in all Chicago if you care. You’ll be the hero of the day, hell, the century.” Eaton stopped to let those words sink in. “You’ve got a chance to

save your city. Take it, won't you?"

Mulholland shot Eaton a glance.

Eaton ambled to the door, pulled it open, looked back once more at his protégé, and sighed. "Or do you plan to waste your life drilling dry holes?"

#