

# RIVER RATS

Leslie J. Wyatt

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# For Cecil: Friend, neighbor, and original River Rat



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P.O. Box 399  
41 First Avenue  
Unionville, NY 10988-0399  
(845) 726-4444  
fax: (845) 726-3824  
email: [mail@rfwp.com](mailto:mail@rfwp.com)  
website: [rfwp.com](http://rfwp.com)



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# Chapter One

The first time I ever saw Henry Nichols, he was standing at one end of the bridge. A thin stick of a person, there was an aloneness about him that made him seem more like an early-morning mist than a real, live person. Chopped brown hair straggled on his neck, and his dark eyebrows were like wispy wings over green, green eyes.

He wore overalls, of course. In 1940, practically every boy in the Chariton River bottoms of Missouri did. But his were so faded, patched, and dirty that you couldn't much tell they had started out blue.

That Saturday morning in June, we were headed out to find something worth doing—me, that is to say, Kenny Barton, and my older brother Jim, along with Bert and Robbie Shuester from down the river just past the bridge. Jim and Bert were both fourteen, and I and Robbie had just turned twelve. We had us a club we called the River Rats, and there was hardly a day went by that we weren't on that old river, one way or the other.

But about Henry. Dad had mentioned the Nichols family just last week, how they'd moved up from Benton County. One of our neighbors, Mr. Gus Weisenheim, was always looking for someone to help him out with his hog operation, and he hired Mr. Nichols. Now on that late June

morning, there was this outsider I knew must be the Nichols boy, Henry. He stood on the bank, looking at us like a half-starved hound that's been kicked before and is not too sure of his welcome.

He was strange.

I don't mean dumb, exactly, but different. Living off with his folks like he did in a rented two-room shack on stilts, with no brothers or sisters—it didn't seem normal to me. The Nichols, they didn't have anything. No truck. Not even a horse, and no land of their own, so people said.

I reckon you could say Henry was not like us.

Still, it seemed rude to just stand there staring. "Hi," I said, half-lifting a hand to wave.

"Pssst! Kenny." Jim reached out and twitched my overalls.

But it was too late. At my greeting, the boy stepped onto the bridge beside us. He looked to be about twelve or thirteen and almost a head taller than me. The five of us eyed each other for a while until he shuffled his feet and ducked his chin. "Hi," he said, peering at us through the top of his eyes. "Name's Henry Nichols."

"Hi. I'm Robbie," Rob volunteered. His brown eyes were earnest in his freckled face, ears sticking out through sun-streaked hair. "This here's my brother Bert," he added, pointing, "and that there is Jim and his brother Kenny." He threw a nervous glance Jim's way.

Henry nodded at each of us. “Junior Morrison was a-tellin’ me about you boys. The River Rats, he calls you.”

Jim took a step forward. He was near as tall as Henry and a good twenty pounds heavier—all muscle, too. “What is that Junior Morrison saying about us?”

“Nothin’ really. Just that you four have a sort of club, is all.” Henry dropped his gaze, kicking at the gravel before adding, “I’d sure admire to join up with y’all.” His green eyes only flicked up for a second before fixing on the ground again.

Jim ran his fingers through his dark curls as he measured Henry with his eye. Watching my brother, I felt some of the pride and yearning that I’d had ever since I could remember. To my way of thinking, there couldn’t be a smarter, funnier brother in the whole of Missouri. He made the world more worthwhile. Warmer. It seemed like the sky was somehow wider and life more full of possibilities when you were with Jim. From the time I could walk, the only thing I needed to make my world bright and shiny was to have him happy with me.

The older I got, though, the more I wished it wasn’t that way, because about half the time, we were at odds, and then—well, then a cold, iron ball rode around in my belly, and if it went on too long, whatever we’d been fighting about wouldn’t matter to me anymore. Just like when I was a little kid, I’d pretty much do anything he’d ask me if we could only be friends again.

All this ran through my mind as we waited to see whether he'd let Henry in. My heart picked up pace just watching, knowing what I'd feel like if it was me standing there.

“Don't know as we need another River Rat.” Jim glanced over at Bert.

Bert blinked like he didn't understand what they were talking about, peering out from beneath too-long blond bangs. He always took that way out when he wasn't sure which way Jim wanted to go.

“I could be a help—run your limb lines, things like that,” Henry offered.

Jim twisted his mouth up, concentrating on his answer. I didn't begin to know what was running through that mind of his. All I knew was that time had slowed to a crawl, waiting for his answer along with the rest of us. Crickets and birds filled the warm air with song, and the old river hummed in harmony while the haze of late afternoon softened tree and branch into billows of green.

So when Jim finally smiled, the picture was complete. That is, until he said, “I suppose you can tag along with us once in a while *if* you remember the rules.”

*Rules?* I didn't know we had rules. I looked over at Robbie with lifted eyebrows. He shrugged.

“And what would those rules be?” Henry asked. He stuck a thumb under his overall strap and shifted the stem of wheat grass he had in the corner of his mouth.

My brother pursed his lips like he was thinking hard and tilted his head to the side. “I guess there’s really only one rule.”

“Which is?” Henry pressed.

Jim grinned, his teeth white in his summer-tanned face. “Which is I am the leader. The boss. You either do what I say or you’re out.” His eyes—a Barton trademark, with their dark lashes and sky blue color—carried an innocence that belied his words.

I crossed my arms on my chest and stared at my brother. That was the rule, sure enough, though I’d never heard it actually put into words. For some reason, it took me back to a long-ago time, one of the many where I’d done something Jim didn’t like.

“I’m not your friend anymore, Kenny,” he’d said, all in a huff, running away from me whenever I’d approach.

“Jimmy, don’t leave me!” I remember calling after him, my heart all squeezed and tears running down my cheeks. I must have been maybe three years old. “I’m your brother. I’m your *friend*.”

Things hadn’t changed much over the years, really. The thought of living without Jim’s friendship still sucked all the color out of life for me. Sometimes I felt that my whole existence was about trying to keep my brother happy so he’d stay friends with me.

But for now he was smiling as we all headed to splash around in the swimming hole for a while, so life was good.

When we got tired of swimming, we laid out on the sandbar and soaked in some late afternoon sun.

Jim was at his shining best. First he told us all the interesting things he'd been reading—things about Egypt and mummies and the like. Then he started in on jokes. “Hey, fellas,” he said. “Did you hear the one where the teacher asked her student, ‘*In which of his battles was King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden slain?*’”

“No,” Bert answered. “Which one?”

Jim’s blue eyes danced. “The student answered, ‘*I’m pretty sure it was the last one.*’”

Bert chuckled. “Good one, Jimbo. Tell us another.”

“How about this: Two silk worms were in an obstacle course race. What was the result?”

We couldn’t guess it, so he told us. “A *tie*, of course.” He thought for a moment. “Here’s another: If April showers bring May flowers, what do May flowers bring?” We hemmed and hawed but again had to admit defeat. Jim tossed a handful of sand up in the air. “It’s Pilgrims. Get it? Pilgrims?”

“Pilgrims?” Henry still looked puzzled. “What’s Pilgrims anyways?”

“You know—they that came over from England on the Mayflower and gave us the first Thanksgiving,” Robbie prompted, his freckles almost lost in his sunburned face.



Henry shook his head. “Truth is, I don’t know no history. Just basic ’rithmetic and reading. I ain’t gone to school since third grade.”

I stared at him. “How’d you manage that?”

Jim poked me in the ribs. “Hush that, Kenny. School’s good for you, and you know it.”

I rolled out of his reach. “Just ’cuz you like it doesn’t mean anyone else does, Jim. Not everyone is a brain, you know.”

“*Has* a brain, you mean?” Bert queried with a grin.

I waved that aside. “So, Henry. How come you get to stay out of school when I don’t?”

Henry sat up and locked his arms around his knees. “My stepdad, he don’t hold by schoolin’.” His voice was quiet, his gaze fixed on the opposite bank.

Robbie sat up, too. “You’ll be goin’ to go to school next fall at Prairie Hill, though, won’t you?”

“Doubt it.” Henry stood up, brushing the sand from his still-damp overalls. “Guess I better be headin’ home now. See ya around.”

“See you, Henry,” I said, standing up as well.

Like a long shadow in the afternoon, Henry slipped through the trees and faded into the rippy grass as if he’d never existed.

Bert broke the silence. “How d’ya think it’s goin’ to work, having him tailin’ us all summer?”

“I like Henry,” Robbie said, crossing his skinny arms across his chest.

Bert scowled at his younger brother. “I wasn’t askin’ *you*, Rob.”

Jim smiled in that oh-so-reasonable, winning way he has. “As long as he abides by the rule, there shouldn’t be a problem.”

I turned my back to them and stared at the place where Henry had made his solitary way through until the bottoms swallowed him up. “Can you imagine not having to be cooped up in school all the time?”

“Yeah,” Bert said, pulling himself upright. “But can you imagine not knowing who the Pilgrims are?”

I couldn’t answer that, and nobody else did either.

## Chapter Two

By the time I and Jim got back from swimming, it was well nigh onto chore time. He got busy splitting a little kindling for Mom's cook stove, leaving the larger chores to me.

No surprise there.

Just so he'd know that I knew, I poked him from behind with my foot, leaping through the doorway into the kitchen before he could retaliate.

"Hi, Kenny." Mom was frying potatoes in the cast iron skillet. Her round face was red with the combined heat of June and cooking over a wood stove. "You're just in time."

I never liked that phrase, because it pretty much always meant I was "just in time" for some extra work.

"I need you to catch a couple of chickens for me and put them in the coop." She pushed back the damp wisps of hair from her face with the back of a hand. "We'll have fried chicken after church tomorrow."

Fried chicken! "Sure, Mom. I'll do it about dark."

"Fine." Mom turned back to her stirring. The ribbon she'd tied her long brown hair with had come untied, straggling off her shoulder like a limp, blue string, and sweat turned her faded calico dress dark down the middle of her back.

Barking and growling erupted from the hallway. Mom sighed as out shot a hound dog puppy, and right behind him, my six-year-old brother Marvin burst into the kitchen. His dark curls were tousled every which way; there was a dirt smudge on his chin and a gap where a front tooth had been.

“Marvin Leonard.” Mom’s usually patient voice was strained. “You quit teasing that dog.”

“I ain’t a-teasin’ him, Mom. I’m trainin’ him.” Marvin dropped to the floor and took to wrestling the half-grown pup.

Mom wiped her brow. “Kenny, take Marvin with you when you go milking, would you? That would really help me out.”

I nodded, but the truth was, I’d almost rather milk a whole herd of cows than have my six-year-old brother trailing my every step. Doing irritating things and getting into scrapes was all I could see that Marvin was good for. He was forever nagging to join the River Rats, trying to prove he was big enough to keep up with us. I can’t count how many times I’ve had to pull him out of some predicament or other.

The pup yowled, and Mom grabbed Marvin by his overall strap. “You let that dog alone and go help Kenny.”

“Okay.” Marvin took to hopping from one foot to the other, flailing his arms like a threshing machine. “Let’s go, Kenny. I got strong hands. I can milk cows.”

“Not tonight, Marv,” I said, taking the milk buckets from their hook on the porch. “I’ll milk. You can feed the bottle calf.”

“But Kenny—”

Jim straightened up and smirked as I passed by, but I pretended not to notice.

“How come I can’t milk, Kenny?” Marvin wheedled as we dumped feed into the feed boxes. “You learned when you was six.”

“It’d take too long,” I said, opening the barn door and waiting for the first of our two cows to make her leisurely way into her stanchion. “Lock her in, Marv,” I called.

“Just let me try, Kenny,” he begged. “I know I’d be good at it.”

“I said *no!*” Grabbing my three-legged milk stool from its nail, I sat down beside Old Red, brushed the dust off her udder, and started to milk. Swish, woosh, swish, woosh, the creamy streams sang into the metal bucket, foam rising as I milked fast and steady.

My thoughts drifted back to the river. Back to Henry Nichols and the way he had looked when he’d said he doubted he’d be going to school in the fall. A guardedness had replaced the open look in his eyes when he’d mentioned his stepdad. Maybe he was just embarrassed over not knowing about the Pilgrims, but it made me wonder what things might be like for him at home. Pushing the thoughts

away, I jammed my head into Red's flank and milked all the faster.

I guess that was why I didn't hear Marvin Leonard open the barn door and let Lindy in. With my eyes fixed on the rising foam in my bucket, I drove myself to finish, hands aching for a rest. "Saw, Red," I muttered as the big Shorthorn shifted her feet. Hitching my stool a bit closer, I began stripping the last rich streams of milk from her bag.

Moments later, I swung the full milk bucket from under her and hung it on a beat-up pair of hobbles hanging on a nail. "There you go, girl." I lifted the stanchion lock, she backed out, and that's when I saw Lindy and Marvin. He had her locked in her stanchion and was using both hands on one teat, squeezing and pulling so hard it's a wonder that poor patient old cow hadn't loosened his other front tooth for him.

"What do you think you're doing?" I barked at him. "I said no!"

He grinned up at me with eyes as blue as Mom's hair ribbon. "I told you I could do it, Kenny. See? I got me some milk in my bucket."

I glared at him. "You don't have more than two teaspoons in there. That's not how you milk, anyway, Marvin. Here, let me show you, if you're so all-fired hot to learn." I edged him aside and sat down. "See?" I said, taking the front two teats in either hand. "You get a rhythm going—pull down and squeeze on one side. As soon as the milk stops squirting,

let up on that teat and pull down and squeeze on the other. Watch.”

I sent the milk singing into the bucket.

“Now me,” Marvin said, pulling on my overalls.

He got set and, by jingo, he actually managed to get into the swing of it. “I’m doin’ it! I’m doin’ it, Kenny!” he hollered. “See, I told you.”

“Just watch that she doesn’t stick a foot in your bucket.” I poured the calf bottle full from Red’s bucket, then waited until my brother’s small hands slowed and the streams of milk dwindled to a mere thread. “You ready to feed the calf now?”

“Yeah. Can I do some more tomorrow?”

I knew it. Now he’d be expecting to milk every time I turned around. His eyes sparkled up at me, waiting for my answer, and for some reason the trusting look in them rankled me.

“Forget it,” I said, thrusting the bottle into his hands. “I said before, I don’t need your help.”

“But Kenny—I’m your brother. Your very own.”

I turned from him and, taking my stool again, began milking Lindy as if Marvin weren’t standing right there. The sweet odor of grass hay and molasses feed mingled with barn smells, and Lindy’s side sweated against my forehead as she snuffled around in her feedbox for an overlooked oat or two. Marvin’s feet didn’t move from beside me.