

# EARNED

# IT ON MY

# OWN



*A WOMAN, A VOICE, A JOURNEY*

**FREE EXCERPT  
FROM CHAPTER ONE**

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I used to think breathing was overrated. I was blessed with tremendous lungs, which allowed me great breath control. I was a singer, but that's not the only place or occasion in which this came in handy. My lungs also helped by being able to clear out a gay bar to warn people of a police raid. When I was a kid, my lungs helped me to go underwater from the shallow end to the deep end of our public swimming pool. One big gasp and, before long, I was there at the end. Unfortunately, one big gasp didn't help me to yell when my older brother insisted, I masturbate him. No, then, I couldn't breathe; I was very quiet.



### *First Grade, Fishing, and Loco*

“Lots of people out there for this,” my dad smirked. He wasn't impressed. I looked around to see him looking out the side from the drawn curtain. I was too busy trying to get myself up on a wooden chair that was placed there for me to reach the microphone. My brothers were tuning up their guitars. It was our turn to make our bid at the local talent contest held in Fulton High's gymnasium. I was three and a bit; they were thirteen and fourteen years old, Ben and Frank, respectively. My name is Linda, which, although mundane, was better than my dad's idea of a joke, and that was to name me Luebering Lil from Cow-Shit Hill.

“Will ya'll put your hands together and welcome the Caldwell family. With three-year-old little Linda singing for us: “You Can't Have My Love.”

“Just git that big long Cadillac Hit the road and don’t come back Don’t show me that roll of bills,  
‘Cause, it won’t lead me from these hills.”

The crowd loved us!!! I made sure as I took a bow that my cowgirl hat would come off . . . yep!  
Everyone “ahhhhh.” WE WON!!!

## *The Beginning...*

I guess you could say I came from a musical family. My dad played the banjo, my mom the piano, and my brothers played guitar. I came from country roots. My dad would remark after I had become a professional singer . . .

“You know, you could be better off if you sang country and western songs. You know, Loretta Lynn has her own bus and employs lots of people. You would be good enough if you just sang some decent shit!”

I never wanted to be anything else but a singer. Where I got my vocal abilities, I’ll never know ‘cause my dad didn’t sing, and my mother, God bless her, sang with enthusiasm, but definitely off-key.

We lived in Missouri. I really don’t know the first two places because I was too young, and now there’s no one left alive who could tell me. I am now getting into, as they say, “the autumn of my life.” Now instead of being a successful singer, I just want someone to call “my person,” with a balanced/spiritual life to maintain me ‘til the end of this lifetime.

But I digress . . .



My dad married my mother and adopted her two boys from her first marriage, Ben and Frank. Then I came along; my brothers were ten and eleven years older than me, respectively. It took a long while until I realized quite by accident that I had been molested when I was young. I was groomed to believe “playing doctor” was common. I thought lots of people engaged in this. Ben or Benny, as he was also known, started molesting me when I was no older than three. I just remember having to close my eyes, take a deep breath, and lie very still on top of the guinea pig crates outside the farmhouse while he and Franky played doctor with me. Ben would probe and touch me all over, examining me as he said, like a “doctor.” I shudder thinking of my young self-lying there while he systematically fondled me! That warped me in so many ways. It also instilled in me a belief that I needed to be passive and comply. I still get angry when I go back to this memory. He was my brother. I didn’t know it was wrong, but I knew it didn’t feel right, physically or mentally. Franky was no help either—he followed Benny’s lead in everything.

Dad, or Clinton (Clint), used to be in the Seabees in the Navy. I have a picture somewhere of when he was a young man. He had a Panama-type hat on with a long camel hair coat and a cigarette in his mouth. I see my dad in a different light when I look at this picture. I could see why Mom had been attracted to him. He looked cool and confident. He was average height, had a lean body, and had a vocabulary that would support the saying, "He cussed like a sailor." Except he tamed it down when my mother was in earshot. Usually, though, he would just go into another room and drink away his mood. He scared me at an early age, but I think it was primarily because he was very gruff when he spoke to me.

When he'd get upset at something that happened to him or aggravated him, he'd take it out on the instrument or situation that instigated his wrath. The story goes that he was driving a tractor out in the field, and it just stopped working. He got upset with the tractor for not complying with his wishes. So he stepped down from the seat and walked back to the barn. All along, he was cussing his favorite line: "Goddamned, son of a bitch, fucking, cocksucking thing!" He grabbed a sledgehammer and walked back to the tractor, completely fuming, and with each word, he hit the tractor.

"God" (smash) ". . . damned" (boom) "son of a bitch" (crunch) . . . you get the idea.

Dad was also known to, on many occasions, drink too much. If Dad drank while he was upset, it would only add to his delicate temperament.

Now there's my mom, or Jonnie, as some would call her. I guess my grandfather always wanted a boy because her middle name was John. She was rather tall, five feet seven, and supposedly never weighed more than a hundred pounds. She was the proverbial glue that kept us all somewhat together. She had a way of making everyone feel comfortable around her.

Highly educated, she never looked down on anyone. Dark-brown unruly hair was always her item of attention on herself. She would run her fingers through her hair and brush it out of the way. She would watch TV and sit twisting her hair while watching. She loved to chew on ice, as well as Heath candy bars. Mom was a vibrant soul. She made friends easily and showed grace in many of her actions.

When I was in the first grade, I went to a one-room schoolhouse which housed less than thirty kids, first through eighth grade. I was the only first grader, which was great! We would warm up the morning with singing which was my favorite part. I would sing with gusto, “Oh, Susanna” and “She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain.” Then the teacher, Mrs. Pickett, would start lessons with the first grade and continue chronologically. One time, when all the students were reading a book specific to their grade, Mrs. Pickett asked me why I wasn’t reading. I informed her that I was finished. “Finished?” she asked. I said yes, so she had me go up to her and bring my book. I had it in my mind that it was considered reading by just looking at the words . . . one at a time. I really thought I wouldn’t be called out on it. So, of course, she asked me to read to her. I stammered and stuttered over the words, and it was obvious to Mrs. Pickett that I was not telling the truth, and I felt ashamed that I would try to get away with that. She was gentle with me about my error, but I never did that again.

After Mrs. Pickett was finished with my lessons, I was allowed to go outside and play. It was a great adventure to stroll in the woods just feet away from the schoolhouse. This probably wouldn’t be allowed in today’s world. I loved going outside, especially when it wasn’t too cold. I would walk around the trees and talk to nature or sing out loud. There was a little brook that ran through the woods, and I loved sitting by it and listening to it. I loved the smell, sounds, and feeling of the woods. If I didn’t go out to play because of the weather, I would go over to Mary Lou’s desk and sit on her lap. She was Franky’s girlfriend and in the eighth grade.

She was a lovely young girl who was kind and gentle with me. I remember her long black hair up against her milky complexion and blue eyes.

“Pete! Let go of Martin . . . do you hear me? Sit down, boys! Stop!” Mrs. Pickett was alarmed. We had a different kind of reality inside the schoolhouse. There was only Mrs. Pickett, no other adult. She was rather plump and short in size. We also had a few kids that were high school age. They seemed too old to be in our school. Two boys were arguing. It was too much for Mrs. Pickett to stop the argument from escalating into a fight. One boy, named Pete, who was the bigger of the two, took Martin’s scrawny arm and bent his forearm away from his elbow, and it snapped! Mary Lou ran toward me, and we ran outside until the whole thing ended with a sheriff’s car taking Pete away and Martin to the hospital. Pete never came back to school, and Martin’s arm was never the same.

After the one-room schoolhouse, we had moved, and I went to second grade in a much bigger school that had first through fourth grade, which encompassed two homerooms. I never thought about it at the time, but I just knew I had a strong attraction for a couple of girls at my school, in particular Peggy. Peggy was special, and I thought very cute. She was friendly toward me and smiled a lot. The butterflies in my stomach always announced her coming toward me at recess. This feeling was just a natural draw I felt toward her and certain girls, never boys except to play some sport like baseball outside. Peggy was in the fourth grade! Already I was into the more mature woman. Ha ha. Anyway, I was vying for her attention in competition with a boy named Andy. However, I distinctly remember that Peggy and I exchanged kisses in the back of the room when the teacher showed a movie on health. “Health” ha! That was a very sweet and innocent time in my young life.



This is where I have to say my mother comes to mind. All the girls at my school had to wear dresses. I was a rambunctious tomboy who loved to climb monkey bars and swing on things. So a proper young girl would never do that in a dress! My mother, knowing my abilities, among other things, let me wear jeans or slacks under my dresses. I was probably the only girl in the whole school who was romping around with the boys and having a great time!

That summer, we moved to a place called Reeds Lake. You could call it a poor man's resort. When I think back on those times, I realize I loved it there, for the most part. There were two lakes that connected at a bridge and a road that wound through the hills and housed about eight cabins. My mother and father managed this place. However, they left it to Ben during the day while they maintained their other jobs in town. Mom was a secretary somewhere, and Dad handled the maintenance at the state hospital.

"I found you, Goody. Now you have to count while I hide!"

He smiled his huge smile and started counting. He was only able to count to ten, so I had to hurry. At times, I would go with my mom, and we would pick Dad up after work, and I got to play with my friend, Goody. This place housed mentally ill patients, and Goody was one of them. He was a very big and tall Black man who had the mentality of a six-year-old, so we got along fantastic. We would play hide-and-seek around all the big machines and sounds that were a part of my dad's domain at the hospital. When I first met Goody, Dad introduced us, and we

shook hands. I had never seen a Black person before in my short life, and when we shook hands, I looked down at my hand to see if the color rubbed off! I didn't know, and it was just innocent questioning. Goody was such a sweet soul. I loved playing with him. He always had a big smile on his face. His smile always brightened up when he saw me. We could have played for hours if Mom and Dad didn't need to get home. When I think of Goody, I always get a warm feeling in my heart, and it puts a smile on my face . . . not as big as Goody's smile but big enough.

Ben had now graduated from high school, so he could manage all the necessary tasks at Reeds Lake during the day. It was a place where people would come to fish, buy bait, or rent a cabin for a few days. Ben and Franky moved into one of the cabins, and I shared a loft with my parents above the main office where we sold snacks and bait and had a pinball machine. There was a counter that went the length of the room in which people could sit and eat. In back of the counter was our family quarters that had a living room, a kitchen, and dining area—a place that we could live without being seen by the customers. Upstairs was the loft which was adjacent to a huge dance hall. Every weekend my brothers, father, and friends made up a country band where I could go and listen and dance—a place where I was in heaven.

On weekends I would go next door when the band was playing, and there I would always dance with this beautiful young lady named Ella. I was mesmerized by her. Here I was, a cottontop, snout-nosed, little seven-year-old sitting in the booth carrying on a conversation with this, in my opinion, very pretty woman. Men would stand around, taking turns trying to get her attention or to dance. Ella just ignored them, and she'd take my hand, and off we'd go. We would dance and dance all around this big hall. Those nights, ah, what great times! After I went to bed, I knew Ella went back to talking with her friends and engaged with the men who had

surrounded the booth before. I would go to bed and lie back in the loft and just listen until I fell asleep . . . all the smells and sounds going through my mind.

The first Christmas there, I was really sick. I had no energy, which was a definite sign I wasn't well. They were worried about scarlet fever. Anyway, I guess my dad had it in his head that I wanted a horse. Okay, I do remember asking for one several times. I did fantasize on being Annie Oakley. So my dad's reasoning was twofold. "Get the kid a horse to make her feel better and use the horse to help round up the deer." We had imported white-tailed German deer. Every so often, the deer had to be cut back because they would overpopulate and use up their resources. So we had men with special permits come out to hunt and kill one deer apiece. My dad had the unenviable job of having to hunt down prey when it was over.

He'd come in from his rounds and say, "I found another," to my mom. "Oh, what a shame. Was it suffering a lot?" she would ask. "Yes, but not anymore," he replied.

Many hunters didn't track down and kill their game to put them out of their misery. Some people just don't have that kind of humanity. They just got their pleasure in shooting and hoping for the best. If the animal or prey was only wounded, they didn't take the time to track it down. When I found out what Dad was doing, it made me cry to know the animals had to die. It took more years for me to learn this was the humane approach when hunting was the objective.

Anyway, back to my horse. There was only one problem with Loco, yes, Loco . . . crazy. You'd think someone would have questioned this choice for a name. If so, no one had taken the time to tell Dad, I guess. Loco was deathly afraid to go on, much less go across the bridge. No, sir, that horse would NOT go across. No matter how many times Dad kicked and prodded the poor soul, the animal was not going. He danced around, strutted, snorted, and stamped, even

reared up a bit, but Dad couldn't convince him. Finally, Dad dropped his guard, and the horse turned around to head away from the bridge. It happened so fast Dad could barely hang on. Loco was headed straight for the water trough. In front of the trough, unfortunately, was a clothesline about eight feet away from the trough. Dad almost got decapitated. Seriously, he did get knocked off the horse because he had to grab the clothesline and hang on.

I hate thinking back on this because it brings to mind how sorry I was for the horse. He was freaked out and scared. I don't know what demons he had inside his head, but he was about to meet another kind of demon . . . my dad.

There are some strong memories that come back to me from Reeds Lake. I was looking back on some of my pictures and saw myself holding up a string of fish. I almost didn't recognize myself. I looked like a little boy with long hair. This started me thinking about the time I took my bamboo pole out to go fishing. I fished off the dock beside the bridge. Mom's rule was strict: never go near the water without a life jacket! I didn't know how to swim. Anyway, I knew I would be fine, so I defied the rule. When I got to the dock, I prepared my line to cast out from the end of the pier. For some reason, I snapped the pole back, which in turn stopped. It must have been caught on some underwater weed, tree, or whatever. This jerk pulled me forward, and I went in the water. I was panicked, splashing around, not knowing what to do but somehow, found myself close to the dock's edge. So I grabbed it and held on, but I couldn't pull myself out; the dock was too high. I looked around and, in the distance, saw two men in one of our rowboats.

I started softly yelling for help feeling rather silly. I looked to the left at the tree next to the bridge coming up from the water, and lying on one of the branches was a snake. To be exact, it was a water moccasin, and it was coming down from the tree and into the water toward me. My silly little cries for help intensified and turned into helpless screams! The snake was truly coming in

my direction. About that time, I saw a blur whiz right past me and into the water. It was Franky! He had been running so fast that when he hit the dock, he sat down on his heels and glided right off the edge of the pier. Ben had gotten to me by now and pulled me up while Franky pushed from behind. I was surprised that everyone now seemed to be there with concern on their faces. When I saw Mom coming up the hill toward me, I felt relieved to be alive.

“That’s it!” Mom screamed. I never saw such terror in my mom’s eyes as I did when she reached me.

“That’s it! Franky, tomorrow you are teaching your sister to swim!”

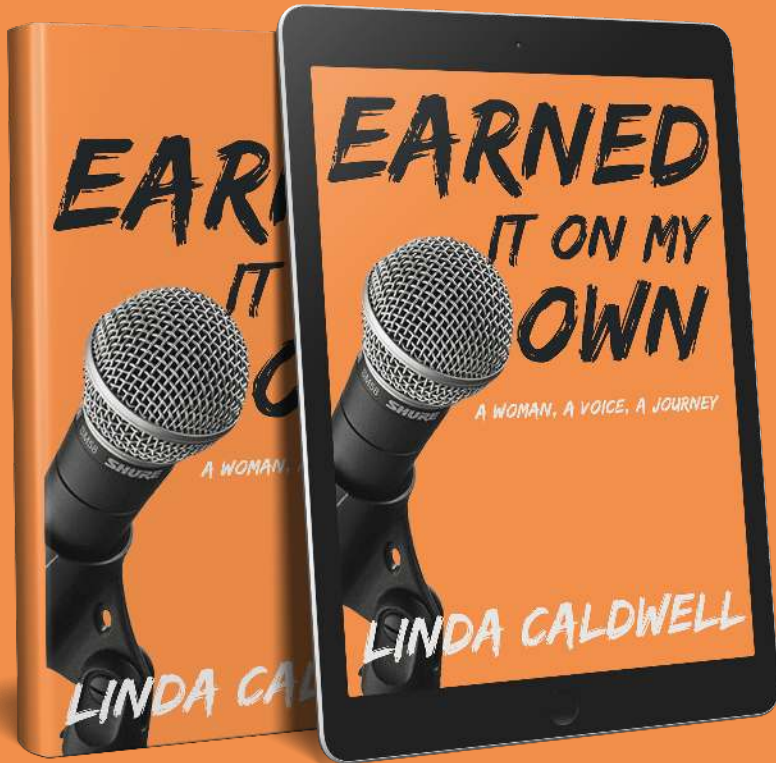
And that was that. Franky did what Mom said, and I was learning how to swim the very next day. One thing living around lakes and streams, the underwater has a life of its own. We had clay pits that had quicksand. At Reeds Lake, in our swimming hole, you had to scurry along to get to the diving board. Little crawdads, as we called them, or crayfish, would nibble or pinch at your feet before you could get there. That year the pit was drained, and we had tons of crawdads to eat!

There was blood on the pathway out of the dance hall that stopped at the couple. It was Ella! A man had Ella by her arm and practically threw her in the front seat of the running car. All the while, she was bleeding and holding her face.

“Who is THAT?” I asked. My dad was talking to some people who had gathered around after witnessing the assault. He ignored me but walked over to my mother and explained that there had been a domestic situation with a man and his wife. What??? Ella was married? Apparently, her husband came to the dance hall and saw her dancing with a man, and he became irate.

So he hit her across the face and yanked her out of the hall and into his car, and they sped off. I couldn't believe no one stopped the guy. They just let him treat her like that and didn't move a muscle to stop him. I never saw Ella again. I cried that night, missing the attention she gave me and the fun we had dancing. I felt very protective toward her and wished I could have stopped the fight. The reality in those days supported the notion that women were more like property to their mate. At least it was in my neck of the woods. I wanted to save her and take her away from that brute.

July was approaching, and things settled down once again. I was getting pretty good at swimming, and my brother, Frank, was going to show me how to jump off the high diving board. I recall how high it appeared to me, standing on this tower and looking down at the water. I was trying to get up my nerve, and Frank was encouraging me when big brother, Ben, saw me and yelled at me to jump, or I was forever to stay a little baby who was too scared to try. Ben was coming toward the tower and started to climb up to the high dive board. I was out on the board and looking down as I felt his presence getting closer. I was just about to take a deep breath and jump when I looked down and saw two snakes in the water right below. Ben was about to get to me and push me off the board! I screamed, "SNAKES!" Ben said, "Stop lying." Frank looked down and confirmed the sighting. Both brothers quickly got down from the diving board and ran inside to get their rifles. They came back out with their guns and stood up on the tower looking down and started shooting at the snakes. I don't know what it was with me and snakes. Maybe it was just the environment, but this was starting to spook me.



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