

A man in a light blue shirt and dark trousers is walking away from the viewer, entering the open double doors of a small, single-story brick church. The church is illuminated from within, casting a warm glow. A large, leafy tree with Spanish moss hangs over the left side of the church. The sky is a deep blue with a hint of orange from the setting or rising sun. The foreground is a gravel path.

THE OPEN DOOR

A Novel of Ten Lives Without a Diploma

WITH A FIELD GUIDE TO SUCCESS AND INDEPENDENCE

PETER SHEPPARD

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A Novel of Ten Lives Without a Diploma
with a Field Guide to Success and Independence

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MBP² Press

The Open Door: A Novel of Ten Lives Without a Diploma, with a Field Guide to Success and Independence

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Part One of this book is a work of fiction. Greater New Hope Baptist Church, the Tuesday class, the New Hope Academy, Forty-Two Freight, Little Lambs Early Learning Center, Second Helping, and every character are products of the author's imagination. Opelousas, Sunset, and St. Landry Parish are real places; the people in this story are not. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Part Two, the Field Guide, is nonfiction. Its statistics, programs, and resources come from the public sources listed in the Notes, as available in October 2026. Laws, program rules, dollar amounts, and phone numbers change; confirm with the source before relying on them. Nothing in this book is legal, financial, or medical advice.

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.

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*For every man and woman who was told what their chances were,
and for the ones who pulled out a chair with their foot
and said, "Sit down. It's not too late."*

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The Ledger

The names Deacon Ambrose Batiste wrote down, beginning in October 2016

Deacon Ambrose Batiste (b. 1955)

Retired millwright; GED at thirty-eight; founder of the Tuesday class

Odile Batiste (b. 1946)

His older sister; fifty years in the church kitchen

THE FIVE MEN

Marcus “Bird” Boudreaux (b. 1982)

Home from six years in prison

Dwayne Lavergne (b. 1975)

Laid off after twenty-three years offshore

Curtis Ledet (b. 1962)

Thirty-one years on the back of a city garbage truck

Terrell “T-Lo” Sam (1999–2019)

A rhymer with a gift and a phone

Reginald “Reggie” Broussard (b. 1993)

Tasha’s younger brother; good with numbers

THE FIVE WOMEN

Tasha Broussard (b. 1990)

Left school at sixteen, pregnant; three children

Gloria Ledet (b. 1966)

Braider, babysitter, second-pew church mother; Curtis’s wife

Angela Victorian (b. 1978)

Home from eight years in the women’s prison

Yvette Joseph (b. 1985)

The funniest woman at the Family Dollar; two jobs

Kiara Sam (b. 2004)

Terrell’s sister; honor roll

And the children and elders who stood beside them: Jalen Sam (b. 2008), Terrell and Kiara’s little brother; Mama Pearl Sam, their grandmother; Brother Cedric Joseph, church organist and producer; Mrs. Marguerite Batiste, reading teacher; and Mr. Leroy Hollins, retired band director.



PART ONE

The Novel



Opelousas, Louisiana · 2016–2026

PROLOGUE

The Open Door



Opelousas, Louisiana. October 2016.

DEACON AMBROSE BATISTE set out twelve folding chairs and then stood in the door of the fellowship hall and argued with himself about whether twelve was pride.

The hall sat behind Greater New Hope Baptist Church on the south side of town, a low brick building with a kitchen at one end, a piano nobody tuned at the other, and a linoleum floor the Mothers' Board had waxed every Saturday since 1971. On the wall by the kitchen hung a picture of Jesus with His hand on a lamb, and next to it, in a dime-store frame, a certificate Ambrose had hung there himself that afternoon with two finishing nails and a level.

STATE OF LOUISIANA, it read. HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY DIPLOMA. AMBROSE JOSEPH BATISTE. 1993.

He was thirty-eight years old when he earned it. He was sixty-one now, two years retired from the chemical plant on the river, where he had started pushing a broom in 1974 and finished as a millwright with his name on a parking spot. He had put the certificate on the wall because the flyer he had taped up at the Washeteria, the barbershop, the Family Dollar and the parole office said *Tuesday Nights. Free Classes. Hot Supper. No Shame.*, and he figured a man who promised no shame had better hang his own on the wall first.

Twelve chairs. He took two away. He put them back.

"Ambrose." His sister Odile came out of the kitchen with a dish towel over her shoulder. She was seventy and had cooked for every funeral,

wedding and revival at Greater New Hope for fifty years. "You going to wear a hole in that floor, and then you going to have to explain it to the Mothers' Board."

"Nobody's coming."

"Then we'll have a lot of red beans."

"Loretta would have known what to say on the flyer."

Odile folded the towel. "Loretta told you what to say. She told you in that hospital bed. She said, 'Ambrose, you the only man I know who quit school and then went back. Go tell somebody how.' That's what she said. She didn't say make a pretty flyer."

He had been married to Loretta Batiste for thirty-nine years. She had taught third grade at the elementary school for thirty-one of them, and she had been the one, in 1992, to set a GED workbook on the kitchen table next to his plate and say nothing at all about it. He had pushed it away for a week. On the eighth night he opened it, because she had put a slice of sweet potato pie on top of it, and a man has to move a book to get to pie.

She had died in the spring of 2014. The cancer had started in her breast and gone everywhere by the time anybody named it. In the last week she had held his hand and said the thing Odile was repeating, and then she had said, because she was a schoolteacher to the end, "And make them write it down. People don't believe what they don't write down."

So on the table at the front of the hall there was a stack of composition books, the black-and-white marbled kind, twelve of them, and a coffee can full of yellow pencils, sharpened.

At 6:10 the door opened.

The man who came through it was tall and thin and moved like he was expecting the floor to give. He wore a gray sweatshirt that still had the fold lines in it from the package and state-issue boots. He was maybe thirty-four. He stopped in the doorway and looked at the certificate on the wall for a long time.

"This the class?" he said.

"This the class," Ambrose said. "And the supper."

“I got out three weeks ago. My P.O. said I need a GED or a job, and nobody gives a job to a man with no GED and six years at Dixon on his application. So.” He shrugged. “I already got the GED. Got it inside. I don’t know what I need.”

“Then you need to sit down and eat,” Odile said, “and we’ll find out.”

His name was Marcus Boudreaux, and his whole life people had called him Bird, because he was skinny and fast and as a boy he used to climb the water tower behind the high school. He sat in the second row, in the chair nearest the door.

At 6:20 a young woman came in with a baby on her hip and two little ones holding the hem of her shirt. She was twenty-six, and she looked forty, and she looked twelve, all at the same time. She said her name was Tasha Broussard and she was only here because the lady at the WIC office said there would be free supper, and was it true about the supper, and could the kids eat too.

“The kids eat first,” Odile said. “That’s the rule in this building.”

At 6:35 a big man in a Halliburton jacket came in, stood in the back, and did not sit down. He had been offshore for twenty-three years. He had been laid off in March when the price of oil fell and stayed fallen. He said his name was Dwayne Lavergne, and he said he was not here for himself, he was here to find out the hours for his wife, and then he stood against the back wall for two and a half hours with his arms folded, and every time Ambrose wrote something on the whiteboard, Dwayne Lavergne’s lips moved.

At 6:50 a woman came in who was dressed better than anybody in the room, in a church suit with a pin on the lapel, and she sat in the very back and kept her purse in her lap the whole night. She was fifty years old. She did hair out of her house on Market Street and babysat for half the neighborhood. Her name was Gloria Ledet, and everybody in Opelousas knew her, and nobody in Opelousas knew she had left school in the ninth grade.

At 7:15, during the blessing, a fifth person came in, a woman, light-skinned with gray in her braids, and slipped into the last chair without a word. When Ambrose said amen and looked up, she was already eating. She did not give her name that night. Later they would know her as Angela

Victorian. She had come home from the state women's prison nine days before.

Five people. Two of the chairs Ambrose had argued about were full, and so were three more.

He stood up front by the whiteboard. He had planned a speech. He had written it on index cards and practiced it on his truck seat. He looked at the cards and then he put them in his shirt pocket.

"My name is Ambrose Batiste," he said. "I was born on Leo Street in 1955. My daddy died when I was seventeen, and I was the oldest boy, so I quit high school in the eleventh grade and went to work. I told myself it was for a little while. It was twenty-one years.

"In those twenty-one years I want you to know what I learned. A man with no diploma can work. I worked. I worked harder than most men with three diplomas. But a man with no diploma works at the bottom, and he stays at the bottom, and every time the plant has a layoff, he's the first name on the list, because the list is sorted by what's on paper, not by what's in your hands.

"I got my GED when I was thirty-eight. My wife put the book on the table. Two years later the plant opened a millwright apprenticeship. You had to have a diploma or a GED to apply. Fourteen men applied. Nine of them had more seniority than me. Six of the nine didn't have the paper. I got in. I retired a millwright.

"That's not a sermon. That's arithmetic."

He picked up a marker. On the whiteboard he wrote three words.

Paper. Skill. People.

"You need three things to make it in this world when you start at the bottom," he said. "You need the paper, because the door is locked without it. You need a skill somebody will pay for, because paper by itself is just paper. And you need people. People who know where the doors are and will walk you to them. That last one is what this room is for."

Tasha Broussard's baby had fallen asleep against her chest. Her middle child had red beans on his chin. She was crying, quietly, the way women cry when they have learned not to make a sound.

“What if you already messed it up?” she said. “What if it’s too late?”

Ambrose put the marker down.

“Baby,” he said, “I was thirty-eight.”

From the back wall, Dwayne Lavergne unfolded his arms.



That was the first Tuesday.

Over the next ten years, more than four hundred people would come through the door of that fellowship hall. Some of them would come once, eat, and never come back. Some would come every week for a year and quit two months before the test. Some would bury their children. Some would go to prison, or back to prison. Some would buy houses.

Ambrose wrote every name in a ledger, a green clothbound ledger he bought at the office-supply store in Lafayette, because Loretta had said people don’t believe what they don’t write down. In the front of the ledger, on the first page, he wrote the question Tasha had asked him, and his answer.

What if it’s too late? — I was thirty-eight.

This is the story of ten of those names. Five men and five women. Every one of them walked into the world without a diploma in their hand. Every one of them was told, one way or another, what their chances were.

Some of them proved the numbers wrong.

Some of them proved the numbers right.

All of them were somebody’s child.

CHAPTER ONE

Bird

Marcus “Bird” Boudreaux. 2016–2026.

THE FIRST FORTY-ONE applications said no without saying it.

Bird kept them in a shoebox under the couch at his mother’s house on Park Street. Some were rejection letters. Most were nothing, an application handed across a counter to a girl who smiled at him until she got to the box that said *Have you ever been convicted of a felony?* and then stopped smiling. He checked the box every time. His P.O., a tired white man named Guidry who had been doing the job too long to lie to anybody, told him that if he lied on the box and they ran him, he would lose the job and maybe his parole with it.

“Check it and explain it,” Guidry said. “Or check it and starve. Those are the two options. I didn’t make them.”

He had gone in at twenty-eight for armed robbery. He had been high, and a friend named Rod had a pistol, and the Circle K on the Lafayette highway had three hundred and eleven dollars in the register. Nobody got hurt. That was the only good sentence in the whole story, and Bird said it to himself sometimes at night, *nobody got hurt*, the way a man holds on to a rope.

He had served six years. Inside, he had earned his GED in the first eighteen months, because a man named Mr. Charles who taught the class at Dixon told him on the first day, “Son, you got nothing but time. Spend it or waste it, but it’s going to pass either way.” He had passed the math on his second try. He had read every book on the library cart, including a biography

of Frederick Douglass three times, and a book on diesel engines four.

None of it went on the application. The application only had the box.

On the third Tuesday at Greater New Hope, Deacon Batiste took the shoebox out of Bird's hands and counted the papers in it, slowly, licking his thumb.

"Forty-one," he said.

"Forty-two after today. I went to the tire place."

"What'd you put down for what you want to do?"

"Anything."

Ambrose shook his head. "That's why. A man who wants anything gets nothing. Nobody hires anything. They hire a forklift driver. They hire a welder. They hire a man who can back a fifty-three-foot trailer into a dock without hitting the post." He set the box down. "What do you know how to do, Marcus? Not what you've done. What you know."

Bird thought about it longer than he wanted to.

"Engines," he said. "I read the diesel book four times. I helped Mr. Charles fix the generator. And I can drive. I been driving since I was twelve. My uncle had a wrecker."

"Then you're going to drive."



The next morning Ambrose picked him up at seven in a white Silverado with the plant's old parking sticker still on the windshield, and drove him to the American Job Center office run by Louisiana Works.

Bird had never heard of it. He sat in a plastic chair under a poster of a smiling woman in a hard hat while Ambrose talked to a counselor named Mrs. Thibodeaux, a heavy, kind woman with reading glasses on a beaded chain. She typed his name into a computer and asked him questions for forty minutes. Was he a Louisiana resident. Was he employed. What was his income in the last six months. Did he have a record.

"Yes ma'am," Bird said. "Armed robbery. 2010."

Mrs. Thibodeaux nodded and kept typing. She did not stop smiling. That was the first time.

“Okay, Mr. Boudreaux. You’re eligible for WIOA adult services. That’s the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. It’s federal money that the state gives out through these offices. If you qualify for a training program on our approved list, and you can show me there’s jobs in it, the program can pay for the training.” She turned the monitor toward him. “Commercial driver’s license. Class A. Seven weeks at the technical college. We’ve sent fourteen people through it this year.”

“How much it cost?”

“Not you,” she said. “That’s the point.”

He had to come back three times with papers. His birth certificate. His Social Security card, which his mother found in a Bible. His release papers. A letter from Guidry saying he was in compliance. Each time he came back, he wanted to quit, because each time there was one more paper, and every paper reminded him of a door somebody had shut. Each time, Ambrose’s Silverado was idling in the parking lot when he came out.

“Why you doing all this?” Bird asked him on the third trip.

Ambrose kept his eyes on the road.

“In 1974 a man named Mr. Lucien Arceneaux taught me how to align a pump shaft with a dial indicator. He was a millwright. He didn’t have to show me. I was the broom boy. He did it on his lunch break for two years, and he never once told me why.” He turned onto the highway. “I figured he would tell me when I was older. He died in ‘88. So now I’m older, and I still don’t know why, but I know what it did for me. That’s all you get, Marcus. Somebody does it for you and never tells you why, and then you’re stuck doing it for somebody else.”



He started CDL school in February 2017.

There were nine students. Two of them had records. One was a woman, a former school-bus driver named Rhonda who was sixty and had decided she wanted to see the Grand Canyon from the cab of a Peterbilt before she died. The instructor was a retired long-haul driver with a white mustache who called everybody “driver,” including on the first day, before any of them had driven anything.

“Driver,” he said to Bird, “pre-trip inspection. Show me.”

Bird had studied the book for three weeks at his mother’s kitchen table. He walked around the truck and called out every part, the air lines, the glad hands, the fifth wheel, the kingpin, the slack adjusters, the lug nuts, the tread depth, and when he got to the end the instructor stood with his arms folded for a long time.

“Who taught you that?”

“A book.”

“Well,” the old man said, “the book did a good job.”

He failed the backing test the first time. He hit the cone. He went home and lay on the couch with his arm over his eyes, and his mother, Miss Hazel, who had cleaned rooms at the motel by the interstate for twenty-six years, came and sat by his feet.

“You going back?”

“I hit the cone, Mama.”

“Boy, you hit a Circle K,” she said. “A cone ain’t nothing.”

He laughed so hard he cried. Then he went back. He passed the second time.



Eleven companies turned him down after he got his Class A.

The twelfth was a regional carrier in Port Barre called Bayou Teche Freight, owned by a man named Earl Fontenot who had a son in Angola and a nephew who had come out of Dixon the year before. Mrs. Thibodeaux called him herself. She told him about the Federal Bonding Program, how the Department of Labor would give the company a free bond on Bird for the first six months, so that if he stole anything, the company would be covered.

“I’m not going to steal anything,” Bird said, sitting in Earl Fontenot’s office under a calendar from a parts store.

“I know you ain’t,” Earl Fontenot said. “Because if you do, I’m going to come find you myself, and the bond ain’t going to cover that.” He slid a W-4 across the desk. “Sixty cents a mile to start. Home every weekend. You got a kid?”

“A daughter. Amaya. She’s eight. I ain’t seen her but twice since I came home.”

“Then you’ll be home every weekend.”



It is hard to write about the next four years, because nothing happened in them that would make a movie. That was the whole victory.

He drove. He drove chemicals from the plants along the river to warehouses in Houston and Memphis and Little Rock. He drove rice. He drove sugar out of the mills in St. Mary Parish in grinding season. He was on time. He did his logs. He did his pre-trip every morning the way the book said, even when it was raining sideways, even when the other drivers laughed at him.

He paid the child support he owed Amaya’s mother, every dollar of the arrears, eighteen thousand four hundred dollars, in thirty-one months.

He went to Greater New Hope every Tuesday he was home. He sat in the second row nearest the door. When new men came in, men from Dixon, from Angola, from Elayn Hunt, with the fold lines still in their sweatshirts, Ambrose would nod at Bird, and Bird would go sit next to them.

There was a night, in the summer of 2019, when Rod came by his mother’s house. Rod had done his time too, four years less than Bird because he had given a statement. He was driving a black Charger with rims that cost more than Bird’s first year of truck payments would.

“You still pushing that truck for sixty cents?” Rod said through the window.

“Sixty-eight now.”

Rod laughed. “I’m making sixty-eight in about ten minutes, bruh. Come ride with me.”

Bird stood on his mother’s porch, and he thought about the shoebox. He thought about Mr. Charles. He thought about a night at Dixon when a man two cells down had hanged himself with a bedsheet and nobody found him until count.

“Nah,” he said. “I got a pre-trip in the morning.”

Rod was shot dead in the parking lot of a club in Lafayette eight months later. Bird drove up from Memphis to be a pallbearer. He did not cry until he got back in the truck.



In April 2021 he bought a 2014 Freightliner Cascadia with six hundred thousand miles on it from a dealer in Beaumont, with forty-one thousand dollars he had saved and a loan from a small lender in Lafayette that worked with drivers. He got his own authority from the federal government. He registered a limited liability company with the Louisiana Secretary of State.

He named it Forty-Two Freight, after the shoebox.

Earl Fontenot let him keep hauling for Bayou Teche as a contractor, and in two years Bird had a second truck. He hired his first driver in 2024: a twenty-nine-year-old named Kendrick who had sat in the second row at Greater New Hope with the fold lines still in his sweatshirt. Bird called him “driver” on the first day.



In May 2026, Amaya Boudreaux graduated from Opelousas High School with honors.

Bird sat in the bleachers with his mother, who was eighty and used a cane now, and Amaya’s mother, who had remarried and who hugged him in the parking lot and said, “Thank you for every dollar.” When they called Amaya’s name she looked up into the stands and found him and pointed, and he stood up, a forty-four-year-old man in a pressed shirt, and pointed back.

That night he went to Greater New Hope, because it was Tuesday, and Ambrose was seventy-one and moving slow, and somebody had to set out the chairs.

He set out twelve. He did not argue with himself about it.

In the ledger, next to his name, Ambrose had written in 2016: *Marcus Boudreaux. 34. GED inside. 6 yrs Dixon. 41 no’s.* In 2026, in a hand that shook a little more, he added a line.

Owner, Forty-Two Freight LLC. Two trucks. One driver hired from this room. Daughter graduated with honors. Paid every dollar.

End of the free sample

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