

Lucky's Way

Gina Hooten Popp

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PROLOGUE

WEST TEXAS

SEPTEMBER 6, 1918

DEAN

Lucky would be home on a reprieve from battle soon. Neither his mother nor I'd a moment's rest thinking about him, not in the months since he'd left for France. Lord knows why I worried. That kid had a knack for being in the right place at the right time from the day he was born. From the moment he was born, really. At this point, no amount of worry was going to help him one way or another.

Leaning on a fencepost, I stared across the flat, dusty-red terrain of the Texas Panhandle. It had been drier than usual, with a hellacious heat spell all summer. And now, at the start of September, without a doubt, change was in the air. I knew it as surely as I knew my own name. But I wasn't afraid. I had lived through far too much to be frightened. Still, a shiver ran down my spine as I wondered if my son Lucky would be up to the tests before him.

A tumbleweed rode a dust cloud across the north pasture, and I tried to brush off whatever was spooking me. After all, things were going great. My wife, Sarah Michelle, and I were on an upside of life. My practice was flourishing and money flowed freely. Friends were abundant. No use wasting one moment of precious time worrying when there were good times to be had.

Reaching into my pocket, I felt for the hundred-dollar bill I always carried with me. Although this was not the same hundred-dollar bill I'd had on me when I rode out the Great Galveston Hurricane of 1900 – it was the one that I'd carried since 1901. Hard to believe eighteen years had passed since I used the hundred from the hurricane to purchase land in Beaumont when I was working in the oil field at Spindletop.

That decision had made me a very rich man. Some called it a lucky break. Others called it incredible foresight. I figured buying that land when I did was a little of both. But I knew in my heart people had only so much control of their destiny. The winds of change could sweep in bringing misfortune or fortune at any

given time. I was living proof of this phenomenon.

As my first wife, January, used to say with a toss of her fiery red hair, “People have little control over where the wind blows them, Dean. So you better learn how to hang on and enjoy the ride.”

She was a beautiful, conniving woman who understood way too much about the way this broken world works. Though I laughed when she said it, her strange turn of phrase rang true to me, and I’d remembered it all these years.

Closing my eyes, I tried to imagine her face. After she moved to New York, I hadn’t seen or heard from her in years. I doubted I ever would.

My second wife, and first true love, Sarah Michelle, didn’t want to tell Lucky anything about January, so I never mentioned her name, though her words and unusual ways crossed my mind on occasion.

From the moment I met Sarah Michelle, she made me want to be a better man...a better person. Her name was the first thing that entered my thoughts every morning. Lucky was a close second. I couldn’t wait for him to get home and figured by now he was on the train from Washington.

1 HOMEWARD BOUND

ANTONIA

The year was 1918. War hung heavy in the air.

Its oppressive force haunted me daily because I lived near the hub of the military – where the country was run – where life and death decisions were made every hour of every day of every month.

I lived in Washington, D.C. A place lonely soldiers drifted through as they maneuvered back and forth from their hometowns to the battlefield. Sometimes their serious faces and starched uniforms gave me a sense of security. Other times I was frightened by their heavy presence. Mostly, they reminded me of my William – his strong jawline and serious dark eyes. How handsome he was in uniform.

But I shook off my sadness. I had a mission and there was no time to grieve.

The women of D.C. were staging a small war of our own. Right here at home. I'd need to walk faster if I was to be on the front lines.

"Antonia," a voice called from behind me. "Wait."

It was Elaine. She had decided to come after all.

Slowing my pace, I turned and motioned to her. "Hurry, I want to be front and center."

She made an effort to move faster, but her fashionable skirts hindered her every step. As always, my dear friend Elaine felt it was more important to be stylish than comfortable. A good portion of her trust fund went to purchasing clothes every month.

Gasping, she said, “Go ahead without me. I’ll catch up.”

“No,” I said, knowing she’d never catch up in those shoes. Besides, the closer we came to headquarters, the more I realized we were never going to be front and center. Stopping, I waited patiently for Elaine.

“Sorry, I know what this march means to you,” Elaine whispered as she gave my stomach a little pat. “I can’t believe you’re so far along and only just now starting to show. You look great in that new dress.”

“Elaine, how can you think a mourning dress looks great?”

“Black becomes you, Antonia. The fit’s fabulous. You don’t look like you’re with child. How lucky you are to be so tall and thin. Even six months pregnant, you’ve hardly changed a bit.”

She was right. Though I was not large, I did walk somewhat differently because of the pregnancy. I was off balance and incredibly lightheaded at times. Just the other day I had two nosebleeds. Of course, as a trained military nurse, I had not dealt with pregnancy or childbirth and I had been very concerned. Thankfully, my neighbor lady, who reminded me of my own mother back in Italy, told me these problems were common.

I wanted to be back in Italy with my mother. Why did I ever think it was a good idea to marry a U.S. soldier?

Again, I shoved my thoughts aside as we took our places for the march.

“Here, let’s stand on the edge of the lineup so I can get out quickly if I need to…”

Casting a worried glance at my stomach, Elaine said, “Are you sure the little one’s up for the long walk? Let’s just watch from the sidelines.”

“No, I need to march. I have to be a part of the fight.”

“Very well. We’ll stay on the edge.”

The band stopped tuning their instruments and a woman at the front cupped her hands and yelled into the air. “Ladies unite!” Pausing for effect, she continued. “Follow me into a new age.”

The band began to play “March of the Suffragettes” signaling the start of the parade. My heart swelled as we began to move forward. How proud I felt to be part of this group fighting for women’s rights.

When Elaine took my hand, I felt hers tremble. “Are you afraid?” she asked.

“Yes, I heard there might be violence,” I said loudly, trying to speak above the tuba’s pulsing beats.

Elaine put her hand to her ear. “What?”

“Violence.” I yelled. “It might get violent.”

Then, the first tomato hit me. In horror, I watched a streak of red tumble down the front of my new dress. I didn’t have money to buy another. In truth, I’d hardly had the money to buy that one.

As the fighting broke out around us, I lost track of Elaine.

A horse reared up on its hind legs. I jumped out of the way just in time, almost tripping over a policeman who’d fallen to the ground, dazed, but very much alive. Quickly, I bent down and picked up the billy club he’d dropped and swung it this way and that above my head. The mob before me miraculously parted, making me think of Moses and the Red Sea. In the melee, I did what I could to ensure the heavy wooden club did not make contact with anyone.

Soon, I found myself in an open area near a train platform.

An officer positioned across the street shouted, “Give me that billy club!” before he started to give chase.

Without a moment’s hesitation, I boarded one of the train cars, hoping to blend with the other passengers. However, once inside, I discovered only one man – a boy really – wearing a uniform. His handsome face looked up nonchalantly at my approach. The gaze of his steel-blue eyes stunned me.

Feeling the policeman gaining on me, I dove under the wooden bench where the soldier was seated. To my surprise, he didn't hesitate to hide me from the officer by spreading his military coat over the bench.

The train floor was hard and uncomfortable and I felt the pulse of the engine through it. A burst of acrid smoke filled my lungs. Holding my hand to my mouth, I tried not to cough.

Shifting on the bench above me, the soldier-boy pushed his travel satchel slightly to the left, which obscured my face from the policeman's view. Soft, well-worn leather touched my cheek, its scent made me heady. I smiled to myself. Once again I had found a hiding place in a room where there was no place to hide.

LUCKY

When the police arrived with billy clubs and guns, the suffragettes scattered faster than leaves on a windy fall day. I couldn't help but laugh as the officers tried to arrest the fleeing women. Fashionable skirts and hats flew in the air as the females ran frantically to avoid being wrangled like cattle.

The colorful chaos reminded me of a dance I'd attended in downtown Houston where a knife fight had broken out. No one had died that night, but I suffered a slight cut alongside my much-wounded pride.

Sitting near the train window, I had the perfect vantage point to observe as the Women's Protest March on downtown went astray. And I must say, I admired the ladies' resourcefulness as I watched their various impromptu forms of escape from their well-armed predators.

One limber young woman vaulted up a wrought iron trellis only to stretch out flat on a wooden store overhang. In hot pursuit, two policemen rounded the corner and ran past her without so much as a glance upward in her direction.

Another woman slipped into a trash bin just large enough for a small child and two others opened the back door of an automobile I'm most certain didn't belong to them and calmly got inside. When another policemen bolted past, one of the ladies rolled down the automobile's window and yelled, "Officer! They went that way."

Such were the goings on when a cold burst of wind ushered into my train car the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen. Dark ringlets framed her intelligent brown eyes and I couldn't help but notice her lithe figure as she vaulted through the door and rolled under the bench I was sitting upon.

Quickly, I spread my overcoat along the edge of the seat, moving my satchel over to provide her more cover. I heard her heavy breathing as she tried to recover.

Looking up, I caught a flash of blue as a policeman climbed the train car's steps.

"Mister, a protester entered this car." The officer huffed as he poked his head inside and surveyed

the small, barren train car. “Where is she?”

“Sir,” I answered. “This train is bound for the Panhandle in West Texas. Only a fool would hide in here.”

Just then, the train whistle sounded and the big engines fired up for the long trip. The creak of slow-turning wheels drowned out what the officer said next as he hopped from the moving train to the platform.

“Don’t get up yet,” I said to the beautiful castaway. “He still has time to pop back in.”

As if on cue, the officer jumped back into the train car and looked about once more, his brow furrowed in angst. Clearly he’d hoped his ploy would work.

I pulled a newspaper from my satchel and opened it, and without a glance in his direction, said, “Sir, I believe the young lady you were chasing went that way.” I pointed out the window in the same easterly direction the suffragettes hiding in the automobile had pointed earlier. In truth, few of the protesters had actually fled in that direction, and it gave me pleasure to know I was sending him on a wild goose chase. Served him right for harassing women for standing up for their rights. My Aunt Jane was a suffragist and she’d won me over to the cause years before.

Jumping back to the station platform, the policeman stumbled a bit as the train picked up more speed. He caught me watching him through the window and shook his fist in my direction.

“Don’t get up yet.” I said again, this time under my breath.

“I must get off the train before it’s traveling too fast to jump.”

I detected a hint of panic underneath her heavy Italian accent.

Pulling back the coat, my heart melted as I looked down into warm, doe-like eyes. “Too late,” I said. “Train’s left the station.”

I saw her bottom lip puff out in a pout.

“Look on the bright side . . .” I attempted to make light of the serious situation. “You can come out now without being arrested.”

Her dark skirt rustled about as she pushed herself out from under the bench.

I reached for her hand. “Here, let me help.”

“No, I can do it. I got myself into this mess and I’ll get myself out.” With that she sat beside me and introduced herself. “My name is Antonia.”

Extending my hand, I replied, “And I’m Lucky.”

“Yes, and I’m very, very lucky. Thank you for hiding me with your overcoat.”

“No, Lucky is my name. Lucky McLaren.” I extended my hand to her again. This time she gave me hers, too. Her cheeks blushed deep crimson as she said, “Thank you, Mr. Lucky McLaren. I didn’t mean to be abrupt, but the last thing I need is your help.”

Her confident air intrigued me, and her lilac-scented perfume sent my head spinning as it gently wafted around me. I moved back a little to try to regain my senses.

After a short period of time the conductor came to take our tickets. I took mine from my coat pocket and Antonia made a show of searching through her purse for hers. Of course, she didn’t have a ticket in her near empty bag so I pulled out my wallet.

Eyeing the cash, Antonia turned to me and said, “Darling, it seems I have lost my ticket.” Flashing a winning smile up at the conductor, she said, “My husband will pay for a new one.”

The conductor returned her smile and made change for a ticket.

My heart jerked wildly when she called me her husband. For the next few moments, I had to concentrate to make my breathing regular again.

Eventually, in an effort to make conversation I said, “Today is my birthday.”

“Happy Birthday, Mr. McLaren.” She hesitated before giving a little smile. “How old are you today?”

“I’m eighteen. Can’t believe I’ve made it this far.”

“How can you be in the service if you’re just now turning eighteen? They didn’t lower the draft age from twenty-one to eighteen until last month. You must be crazy to have volunteered at the ripe old age of seventeen. Are you crazy?”

“No, I do not suffer from insanity. My Pops anticipated the draft coming and he knew I wanted to be a pilot in the US Army Air Service – so he told me if I wanted to select where I served, I needed to volunteer immediately.” She didn’t respond, so I continued. “Pops thinks I’ll stand a better chance of survival in the air. And so do I.”

The horrified look in her eyes told me she thought otherwise. It warmed my heart to think she might fear for my safety.

Changing the subject, I inquired, “Antonia, how old are you?”

“It’s not nice to ask a woman her age, Mr. McLaren.”

“But I thought you were a modern woman.” I teased.

An annoyed look crossed her face as she answered. “I’m twenty-and-a-half, if you must know.”

I grinned at her in what I thought was a very engaging way, but she seemed to ignore my charm.

Another awkward moment passed before she said. “What do you think? I look too young to be twenty?”

“No,” I countered. “I think you look every bit your age.”

A dark storm gathered in her eyes. And I knew I had met my match.

ANTONIA

After we had ridden several hours, the train stopped in a small town to pick up passengers and add water to its great spitting engine. I debated getting off, but my instincts told me not to draw attention to myself. I needed a larger city where I would blend in easily. However, I did not have the funds to get back to downtown D.C. and wondered if I should turn myself in to the police and let them escort me back. Surely, the simple crime of participating in a women's protest march would not bring much punishment.

Looking up, I saw the train conductor walking through the other cars back toward our car. Cautiously, I tucked the tomato stains on my dress out of sight. They were not so obvious now that they'd dried. I prayed I would be able to get them out with a careful washing. *Why, oh, why did I wear my one good dress to a protest march?*

I tried to avoid eye contact with the conductor.

"Sir," he addressed Lucky. "Have you or your wife seen a stowaway from the suffragette march? The police telegraphed us at this stop that they believe our train left DC with an unknown female onboard. We must find her as the police want to arrest her."

"Good sir," Lucky answered with a smile. "The only protesting woman I have seen today is this person sitting beside me."

Picking up where Lucky stopped, I continued. "Is it a crime to march peacefully? Why such a fuss over this female protestor?"

"No, ma'am. It is not a crime to march peacefully. But seems this particular woman put a police officer in a coma after she hit him on the head with his own billy club."

Fear rose in my throat and made my voice little more than a squeak. "And you believe this woman wounded him? Why would someone commit such a crime just to escape being arrested in a protest march?"

"Seems people saw her running away from the crime scene waving the policeman's billy club high

above her head.”

I glanced at my new friend, Lucky, certain he would now turn me over to the authorities. But he did not. Instead he turned his full attention to the conductor. “I watched many of the protesters fleeing before we left the station. For the most part, they were the ones taking the brunt of the violence from the bystanders who were mostly tough guys throwing rocks and sticks. Is it possible someone else hurt the policeman? Perhaps one of those thugs?”

The conductor turned to look me squarely in the eye. I clutched my skirt with both hands trying to make certain the stains did not show. “Yes,” he said. “I suppose it is possible if not probable. Little information is known yet.”

The train whistle sounded loudly indicating our impending departure.

The conductor stared at me again before addressing Lucky. “Keep your eyes open for anyone suspicious. They’re going to search the train at our next stop.”

My heart lurched at his words. Gathering my courage, I watched as he made his way back through the train cars. Once he was far enough ahead, I moved to our car’s door and opened it. The engine whistled. Smoke billowed. Drawing in my breath I positioned myself to jump from the steel steps leading down to the platform. But I couldn’t do it.

Then I felt a gentle bump from behind. It was Lucky’s satchel. He was headed down the train car steps, overcoat over his arm, holding onto the metal railing.

“Let’s go,” he said quietly as he gave my back a little push that sent me airborne.

Stumbling onto the platform I turned in time to see him gracefully leap and land like a cat – a cat that had no intention of losing a single one of his nine lives. Trembling, I reached toward him and, holding me close, he maneuvered us close to a large trash bin where he steadied and calmed me. For a moment, I thought he was going to toss in his overcoat, but instead he let something long and cylindrical slide down inside of the overflowing trash.

The billy club...he had thrown away the billy club. I hadn't even given it a second thought since I'd stashed it under the train bench earlier.

"Please," I pleaded. "Get back on the train."

"Why?"

"You should not feel sorry for the likes of me."

"Antonia, I don't feel sorry for you."

"Then why are you helping me?"

"Who says I'm helping you?" He gave me a mischievous grin. "I just up and decided a few seconds ago that I wanted to buy a new car and drive to West Texas."

"Buy a car? You just decided to buy a car? You have no intention of helping me?"

"Well, you can come with me if you need a lift."

I made certain he saw the scowl on my face.

He continued, unfazed, "Antonia, has anyone ever told you that you have incredibly beautiful eyes? So soft and brown."

My heart softened a little until he added the following, "Not unlike this cute little heifer back on our farm. Too bad my mother has already named her Sybil. I would like to have named her Antonia, after you." His blue eyes twinkled as he spoke and his dark wavy hair blew in the wind making him even more dashing than when I'd first noticed him on the train.

I tossed my hair and sniffed a little before proclaiming loudly, "Sir, you offend my delicate sensibilities." I was certain I had embarrassed him in front of the other people milling about on the train platform. Several gentlemen stopped as if debating coming to my aid.

But Lucky didn't appear embarrassed in the least. Instead of cowering, he knelt on one knee and

took my hand, and said, in exaggerated politeness, “Please, Antonia. Let me assure you I hold you in the highest regard and only meant my comparison of you to a bovine as a compliment.”

I fought the urge to smile, but lost the battle, especially after several young girls on the crowded train platform giggled at his antics.

This Lucky McLaren knew all too well that he was one good-looking young man. Theatrical in his movements, he was the kind of person everyone noticed. Yet he acted like he didn’t notice them noticing. And that made people like him even more.

JANE

“John, listen to this,” I said as I began reading aloud from the newspaper. “It appears the Allies have yet another victory in their latest series of sweeping successes this summer. Experts agree. Soon the German Army will no longer be able to continue fighting.”

I folded the paper and put it down on John’s beautiful mahogany desk. A massive piece of furniture befitting of one of the wealthiest oilmen in the United States, certainly in Houston, Texas. However, he rarely sat there. Instead, he did his real work on the tiny kitchen table in our downtown townhome.

“We can only hope the end is near. I don’t like our Lucky being so far away and in danger,” he said as he leaned forward to look at the paper. “Ever since Dean wrote to tell me Lucky was coming home on a reprieve, I’ve thought of little else. Oh, how I wish he could spend time with us in Houston, but I understand his need to stay with Dean and Sarah Michelle in West Texas.”

“You do remember today is his birthday?” I hesitated to ask, but since John’s stroke a few months back, I’d noticed he forgot things. I tried to be casual in reminding him.

Yes, September 6th. How could I forget? Lucky was only a few days old when we rescued him. Even as a newborn, he was one tough little fella to have survived the Great 1900 Hurricane unharmed.”

“Knowing Lucky, he probably slept through it.”

John smiled as I said it. We both were all too familiar with Lucky’s laid-back manner. Nothing seemed to worry him.

“Yes, Lucky is the perfect name for him,” John said.

“I think it was more than just luck that saved him. You had the foresight to hang his swinging crib in the rafters before the storm hit. That had a lot to do with it.”

“It wasn’t my idea.” John leaned his head back and closed his eyes and looked every bit the company president in his ornately carved matching mahogany chair with padded leather insets. “It was Sister

Elizabeth's. Remember the nun at the orphanage? She was always thinking about what was best for the children. I was only thinking about saving my own backside. To this day I wonder if I'd stayed with her and the orphans if things might have turned out differently."

"John, remember I, too, was in the storm, though I was inland in Houston. No one had control over what happened during the height of the hurricane."

"Maybe. Maybe not." He reached his hands up and rubbed his temples as if to massage away a headache. "Let's talk about happier things," he continued.

I couldn't contain myself any longer. "I have something to tell you. I've written Lucky and convinced him to come through Houston on his way back to Washington. It was supposed to be a surprise...."

A twinkle returned to John's blue Irish eyes and his overall demeanor changed.

"It's a good stretch out of his way, but he's young, he'll travel easily." I watched as John ran his fingers through his thick dark hair for the umpteenth time. It was starting to turn silver at his temples and it only served to make him that much more handsome.

"And there's more," I continued. "My brother Robert is also coming."

A broad smile broke across John's face as he turned to me and said, "This day is turning out better than expected. Tell Virginia to plan a dinner party for our guests. Oh, and a fishing trip! Lucky is staying long enough to go fishing, isn't he?"

Without waiting for an answer, John turned and picked up the phone. I heard the operator say, "Number please," and noticed he recited it to her by memory.

A cheery voice answered, "Hello?"

"Hello ... Sarah Michelle. It's John. Listen, I have a request and I want you to say "yes"... and I want you to mean it. You and Dean must come to Houston when Lucky arrives home from France. It's been far too long since we were all together."

Sarah Michelle's lilting voice said something, but it was too faint for me to hear.

Then John replied, "Of course, Robert will be here."

John laughed as I quietly exited his office. I could always count on Sarah Michelle to know just what to say to lift his spirits. Years ago, I used to be jealous of the special bond Sarah Michelle and John had, but I had come to realize that John was not the kind of man that would take his marriage commitment to me lightly. Yes, he would always have a special place in his heart for her, but he loved me and of that I was certain. His every word and action confirmed it. He was a kind and gentle man – which was rare for someone who had acquired such great wealth and status.

But I can attest he was the same John as the day Spindletop came in, spewing its black gold all over him and the other men on the crew. The fact that he, Dean, Sarah Michelle and my brother, Robert had bought land in the area made them wealthy almost overnight. I couldn't help but compare it to the way the Great Hurricane had stripped away their former lives in less than twenty-four hours only months before. No wonder John often told me, "The only thing certain in life is that it can and will turn on a dime."

On my way out, I stopped by John's assistant's desk. "Virginia," I said. "Robert, and Lucky are coming to town and we need to plan a party . . . and a fishing trip . . . a big sea fishing trip in Galveston. You know how they both love adventure."

LUCKY

What was Antonia's story? I felt certain she wasn't a cold-blooded killer. The billy club had no blood on it and her dress bore only tomato stains.

She did have a secret though. When I helped her leap from the train platform, my hand accidentally brushed her pregnant stomach, sending shards of disappointment through me. She'd brought a rush of excitement into my life and I'd been hoping for more. But, of course, she belonged to another. How could I think such a beautiful woman would still be available at her age?

But why wasn't she wearing a wedding ring? Certainly she must be married. An unwed mother was rare in this day and age. However, a spirited personality like her might try to go it alone. She was a strong supporter of women's rights.

I would not rush her for the details. I would let her tell me when she was ready, and then, only if she wanted to tell me. The war had taught me to enjoy the moment and not ask too many questions. The war had also taught me not to ask questions you might not want answers to.

Still, I thought I'd probe for a little information. "Is there anyone you want to contact? A family member you need to tell where you are?"

She looked puzzled. "No. My family is in Italy. I would prefer they knew none of what has happened today."

We walked along the wooden sidewalk toward the city's main street, a hub of activity filled with people bustling to and fro from the many stores, their arms loaded with packages wrapped in brown paper with string.

"What do you say we go buy an automobile?"

Antonia's eyebrows shot up in wonderment. "Do you have enough money with you to make such an extravagant purchase?"

“I’m actually going to let my Uncle Robert make the purchase over the phone. He’s been after me to get Dr. Dean something he can drive to visit his patients. He has a lot of patients out in the country and he usually rides a horse when he makes his rounds. Sometimes he takes a wagon if he thinks he might need to bring someone back to the hospital in town.”

“And your Uncle Robert is just going to pick up the phone and buy an automobile? How will he do that? No one will give you an automobile just because your uncle tells them to do it.” I noticed as she talked she became more excited and her voice got louder until she was almost yelling.

I jumped back, giving her a little space before I calmly replied. “Of course not, he’ll arrange to have his bank wire the funds.”

She seemed baffled by my answer and I took the moment of silence to survey the many storefronts. There was a Post Office and a General Store just a few steps away.

“Not to change the subject,” I said this because I really did want to change the subject, “. . . but we should probably stop in here and get a few groceries. It’s going to be a long trip and there’ll be some stretches of Texas where we’ll only see dry grass and a few head of cattle.”

“No stores?”

“No. There may not even be much of a road in some places.”

Disappointment, perhaps fear, clouded her stormy gaze.

“Don’t worry.” I continued. “I have a gun and a knife on me. And we can get some blankets. Extra cans for gas.”

“I don’t know.” Her voice was hesitant. “Perhaps I should stay here in this city for a while, then make my way back to D.C.”

“You mean hitchhike back?” I tried not to let her hear my desperation. Just the thought of her leaving made my heart sink.

“No, I’ll ask my friend Elaine to send money. Or I’ll just explain to the local police what happened – turn myself over to them and have them escort me back. I feel certain I can straighten everything out.”

“I’ve got a better idea. Why don’t I call your friend Elaine and let her know you’re safe. Then I’ll ask her to give us a feel for what’s being said about you and the other protesters. We need to give the authorities time to find who really clubbed the policeman.” Holding the wooden door to the General Store open for her, I continued. “But first help me do some shopping, Antonia. I’ll need supplies whether you make the drive to West Texas or not.”

“Maybe we should call Elaine first,” she stated matter-of-factly.

Worry had replaced the bright light in her eyes and I felt the need to protect her, though I knew she didn’t need or want my protection.

“There’ll be a phone we can pay to use at the Post Office,” I said pointing to the next door down the street. “Do you have her number?”

“Yes, I have it in my purse. Elaine is the only person I know that comes from a family wealthy enough to have a phone in their home. Such a luxury in this day and age and she lets me use it when I have a need. Which is not often I assure you.”

At the Post Office, I noticed two assistants waiting on lines of customers with packages and letters to send. One frazzled lady tried to corral a small boy and girl as they danced about eating puffs of pink cotton candy. Its sweet aroma whetted my appetite and I realized Antonia must be starved.

Just then the Head Postmaster came out of the back room. I motioned for him and he walked our way. “We need to make a call to Washington, D.C.” I said.

“That’ll be a quarter,” he said.

Fishing in my pocket, I brought out two dimes and a nickel. He took the coins from my hand and he went to the cash register till to put it inside. Next he pulled the phone out from under the counter and sat it

down. "Do you have the number," he said.

I watched as Antonia handed him a small slip of paper with a number on it from her almost empty purse.

As the Postmaster got the operator on the line, I said to Antonia. "Should I do the talking?" She shook her head "no". But I protested, "Just in case the police are..."

A distant voice answered "Hello" on the other end of the crackling phone line and the Postmaster gave Antonia the receiver. She immediately handed it over to me.

"Hello," I said to the feminine voice on the other end. "I'm calling for Elaine."

"This is Elaine's sister, Ava. May I take a message?"

"Ava," I said. "I'm a friend of Antonia's and I want Elaine to know that Antonia is safe."

"Yes, I will tell her and please tell Antonia to stay where she is. The police are still rounding up protestors and putting them in jail. Elaine is in jail as we speak."

As Antonia leaned in, listening to our conversation, she gasped.

"Jail time for a protest march?" I said. "That's inconceivable. I thought President Wilson put an end to punishing the suffragettes months ago, when the country entered the war. In fact, I recently heard he's even supporting their cause. I absolutely can't believe Elaine was taken to jail with the other women for protesting."

The line crackled and the gentle voice on the other end continued. "She received jail time for disturbing the peace . . . people were throwing things at the women to provoke them, and, Elaine . . . I'm afraid Elaine fought back. I'm very concerned as the women are protesting again by staging a hunger strike while being held captive."

I didn't know what to say, so I simply said, "Thank you for taking my message. I will call again soon."

Elaine's sister said goodbye. And the phone line went dead.

I walked to the front of the Post Office and opened the door for Antonia. A little bell chimed as the door opened and closed behind us.

Outside on the busy sidewalk, I turned to Antonia and said, "Please keep me company on my trip home. Or, at least let me loan you money to stay here." I couldn't bear the thought of her sitting in jail for a crime she did not commit.

"I'm going to be..." she took off running for a nearby trash bin. Holding her long tresses back with one hand, she delicately leaned over it and emptied the contents of her stomach.

Taking out my handkerchief, I followed to assist her.

She waved me away and began a series of dry heaves over the garbage can as she tried to shoo away a horsefly buzzing nearby. Finally she recovered and said, "Your hankie, please." She took it and cleaned herself.

"Just throw it away." I motioned toward the can.

"I'm pregnant," she said.

A pain stabbed my heart as she said the words. Recovering quickly, I said, "Should we call your husband?"

"My husband is dead. He was a soldier just like you. And I was a military nurse."

I stared at her, not knowing what to say, though my mind was filled with a hundred thoughts. "Was he in the US Army Air Services like me?" I knew it was a strange response as I said it.

"Yes. His name was William Trillery."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know a William Trillery." As I said his name her eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry," I said softly, feeling directly responsible for her grief. My heart sank further as I thought of the horrors she

must have witnessed as a nurse in the war. I knew what it was like to see things that could not be unseen. It changes a person at their very core.

ANTONIA

While others passed us by, hurried to get somewhere, we walked slowly, like we were the only two people in the world. I felt like I had known the man beside me all of my life . . . as if we had been destined to meet in this life. Never before had I felt so close to someone in such a short time and the feeling both frightened and exhilarated my very soul, because I knew what I must do.

With great hesitation and a heavy heart, I said, "Lucky, I cannot go any further west with you." My eyes stung with tears as I walked beside him. "You are so kind, but I must take control of this situation. I am going to turn myself in and deal with the consequences."

Stopping mid-stride, he turned to me. "I think you should wait until things have settled down a bit. At least wait until you've had the baby. You don't want to be pregnant in prison."

"They are not going to put me in jail..."

He cut me off. "They put your friends in jail for much less than the crime you've been accused of committing. Please wait and let some time pass. Cooler heads will prevail."

"And where will I go? What will I do for money? For food?"

"Stay with my parents in West Texas. My mother is the kindest person in the world. You'll see. And Pops is a doctor. He could use a nurse's help."

"I don't know."

"I do know." He put his hands on either side of my arms and looked at me with eyes so sincere. It was the first time I had really looked at him up close. In the sunlight, I studied his unusual coloring and chiseled features. This Lucky, he was beautiful with his dark wavy hair and firm, determined lips. I found myself wondering what his parents looked like.

Of particular interest to me were his perfectly straight teeth, probably because my bottom teeth were crowded and overlapped, though my top teeth were decently aligned. As a young girl, I had practiced smiling

so that only my top teeth showed. Truly, he was lucky in every way.

I looked at him again and he winked.

“Did you wink at me?” My voice raised an octave higher as if accusing him of some horrific deed. As if his winking were the most terrible thing in the world.

“No. I was winking at the lovely woman behind you.”

I turned to see a slightly overweight female who had to be near the age of eighty standing directly behind me. I could detect the faint scent of mothballs beneath her lavender perfume.

She smiled at us and reached out to pat my hand. “Dear child, this one’s a keeper. Don’t let him get away.”

Lucky caught the woman’s eye and winked again. She gave him a sly wink back as she hobbled away. I felt the color rise in my cheeks.

“See, your delicate sensibilities should not have been offended. I have a tendency to wink at everyone.” He continued, oblivious to my embarrassment. “I have a weak eye and had to do eye exercises as a child to correct the problem.”

Dubious, I asked, “How does one exercise an eye?”

“Very carefully,” he replied. “I’ll show you later if you’re really interested. Right now, I want to buy an automobile.”

LUCKY

“If I’m lucky,” I said.

“And you are,” Antonia said with a smirk and a flip of her hair.

“If I’m lucky,” I continued, “the bank will have a telephone.”

“What’s wrong with the Post Office telephone I just used?” She asked, sounding suspicious.

“I need privacy...I need a quiet, private place to write down the information my Uncle Robert gives me . . .”

Her brow furrowed. “I don’t understand. No one cares what kind of automobile you and your uncle are buying. You two must be doing something illegal.”

I noticed her Italian accent became heavier – her voice louder, the more excited she became.

“I need to be able to write down the bank routing number,” I whispered so that she would have to lean in to hear me. “Information that should remain private.”

“You’re just going to give them a bunch of numbers and they’re going to give you a big, expensive automobile,” she exclaimed.

Obviously, my whispering had not influenced her to lower her voice. Waving her arms in the air, she continued with her tirade.

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” she said more to herself than to me. “Oh look, it’s Mr. Lucky McLaren. Let’s give him a car. Good luck, brother. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

For a moment, I thought she might be angry with me, but then I realized it was in her nature to talk loud. She certainly was passionate about her opinions.

“Antonia,” my tone was light-hearted, “I believe I might invest in a pair of ear plugs if we are going to be friends.”

At first her look was puzzled. Then she snorted in annoyance and stuck her nose up in the air in a most haughty way as she stalked off down the wooden sidewalk. I followed closely behind as she pretended not to notice me.

• • •

As we entered the bank, I caught the young male clerk's double take of Antonia. In fact, I noticed a lot of people noticing Antonia.

Beautiful, though not discreet, she barged toward the clerk and demanded, "We need to use the telephone to buy an automobile. We're going to drive to the West Texas Panhandle. Have you ever heard of that? The Panhandle? I'm sure it'll be hot as Hades in the Texas Panhandle."

The postal clerk handed over the phone, eyes wide with wonder, or, perhaps shock. I couldn't help but notice the satisfied smile on Antonia's face.

Taking the phone from her hand, I said softly to the bank clerk, "Do you have paper and a pen I could use?"

He quickly reached in the top drawer of his desk and said, "Here you go, sir."

My phone call to Robert was brief, but it was probably one of the most important conversations I would ever have in my life. Hanging up, I turned to Antonia and said, "Let's go. There's been a change of plans."

Whether it was her sense of adventure or the fear in my voice, she followed me out into the street where I waved down a passing taxi. Throwing my satchel in first, I turned and helped Antonia inside before getting in myself. I'd barely closed the door when I shouted, "Please take us to the airstrip, and step on it... we've got to fly to Houston. My father is gravely ill."

Antonia began to shake her head and muttered something about me being crazy. "No, I'm not going to Houston in an airplane. No, no, no."

“Antonia, please...” I pleaded. “This is no time to be afraid.”

“Who’s afraid?”

I’d hit a sore spot. Apparently it was important to her to put on a brave front.

“You’re insane. First you want to buy a car and drive to the Panhandle. Now you want to take a flight to Houston. How did your father move from town to town so fast?”

“I have two fathers.”

She scrunched up her face and I could tell she was about to explode.

I took a chance and put my finger to her lips. “I have two fathers. A biological father named John McLaren and a father who raised me named Dr. Dean Roland. I call him Pops.”

Her look softened and her voice lowered. “Which father is ill?”

“The biological one. He’s in Houston.”

“Do you have two mothers, too?”

“All I know about my biological mother is she was hurt in a bad storm when I was a baby. I suppose that’s why John let Dean and Sarah Michelle raise me. He probably couldn’t go it alone after he lost my mother. As for my real mother, I don’t even know her name. My father never talks about her. I guess it’s just too painful. ”

Antonia was pensive, but no longer angry.

Our cab arrived at the airstrip in record time. I could see the crew taxiing up the dirt runway with a JN-4 biplane. Relief flooded my body. I had trained on the “Jenny” when I was first learning to fly.

“C’mon,” I said as I handed the taxi driver a fistful of change. “Our ride is here.”

• • •

Antonia trembled as I strapped her into the passenger seat.

“Not that you’re scared or anything,” I said, “but if you’ll breathe into your fear, it will eventually melt away.”

“How do you know this?” Her big brown eyes met mine and I saw sheer terror in them.

“I just know. I’ve had a little practice with fear.” I tugged at the straps holding her in the seat. “Another strategy is to slowly count backwards from a hundred. It will keep your mind occupied until your nerves calm down.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Stay right here. I’ve got to check the plane one more time before we take it up. We’ve got good weather. It’ll be smooth sailing.”

I started the engine and proceeded to make another round of the plane’s exterior. Just then I heard a voice calling me. It was another pilot from inside the small metal hanger they called an office. “McLaren. McLaren.”

Concerned, I turned and said “What?” dreading more bad news.

“Red Sox are leading the Cubs two to one.”

“Hey, how’d you hear that so fast?” I yelled over the engine noise.

“I heard it over the wire, and I also heard they’re using carrier pigeons to deliver updates every inning to soldiers forty miles away. What do you think about that?”

“I think people will do anything to keep up with baseball and those government officials need to get off the players’ backs about closing down the game during the war. People – soldiers especially – need the entertainment if nothing else.”

“You got that right,” the other pilot said.

Baffled, Antonia said, “You’re getting ready to take this thing up in the air and you’re talking about a ballgame?”

I smiled in her direction. “Hey, he knew I wanted to hear the scores. Told him I had money on Boston when we first got out of the taxi.”

The pilot met me beside the plane. “Good luck, you two,” he said, extending his hand to me. “I’m also supposed to tell you your brother Robert said a car would be waiting on the north edge of the oilfield.”

Wiping my hand on a rag I shook his hand. “Thank you. Thank you guys for everything.”

Antonia closed her eyes and mumbled a series of prayers. Climbing into the pilot’s seat, I looked at her one last time before taking-off.

I could barely hear her as she asked, “Lucky, are you sure you can fly this plane?”

“Antonia,” I yelled into the wind. “I’m a fighter pilot.”

“Yes, but can you fly this plane?”

“I’ve been in a “Jenny” once or twice.”

“But did you fly it?”

I pretended I couldn’t hear her, but I really could. She was slowly counting down backwards from one hundred. Ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven . . .

JANE

Robert was on the phone with someone. I thought it might be Dean, but as I listened closely, I heard him say Lucky's name. They were making arrangements for him to fly in to Houston. I'd thought the plan was for Lucky to travel by train to West Texas. He must have stopped to change trains. Everything was a blur and I couldn't think straight. I needed Robert to get off the phone so we could get to the hospital.

The ambulance had just left, its siren beginning to wail. At least it was a sign that John was still alive as they raced toward the hospital.

Finally, Robert hung up the phone, but before I could say anything, he ran to John's secretary's desk and said, "Virginia, please have a car waiting at the north edge of the Sedentary Road oilfield to pick up Lucky and his traveling companion. They're flying in on a biplane." With that he turned and got his hat and coat.

"Let's go, Jane," he said, as if he'd been the one waiting on me.

• • •

In the car, Robert drove faster than I'd have liked. In fact, he was driving so fast, I caught sight of the ambulance up ahead. Cars were moving to the side to let it pass and Robert was moving full speed ahead. My stomach wrenched in fear and bile rose in my throat. Tomorrow it would be in all the newspapers that John McLaren had a heart attack. Why couldn't the press ever give him a moment's rest?

Right now, I needed to concentrate. And so did Robert, so I didn't ask him how it came about that Lucky was flying a biplane to Houston. There would be time to talk later.

Why does tragedy always happen when you least expect it? The day started out like any other normal day. After I took my bath and dressed, one of the maids wanted to fit me for last minute alterations on the gown I'd chosen for the charity dinner. I had just put on the dress and she'd begun placing pins when I heard the downstairs maid scream. Within minutes, another maid burst in to tell us they'd called an ambulance for John and that I must come quickly.

Oh, no. John is a presenter at the event tonight. Oh, no. Someone needs to tell them. Virginia will tell them. I must concentrate on John.

I couldn't believe John had a heart attack. I'd been in his office less than an hour before when he was chatting with Dean and Sarah Michelle about Lucky's visit. He'd seemed so pleased they could all come to Houston.

The maid found him when she'd gone into his office to empty the big ashtray. She thought he'd fallen asleep in the big leather chair behind his desk. But when he didn't move when she emptied the ashtray, she realized something was wrong. Very wrong.

LUCKY

I saw a worker flagging us in with a red rag. Beside him, the car Robert had sent sat waiting for us at the edge of the oilfield, where there was plenty of room to land the “Jenny” and leave it with his crew for safekeeping. When I helped Antonia out of the plane and onto the ground, I hoped I wasn’t too rough with her. But I had to hurry. We’d been up in the air for hours. Dad could be dead by now. Or he could be barely hanging on to his last breath. Or he could be making a recovery. Either way, I wanted to be with him.

Antonia started back toward the plane. What was wrong with her? Couldn’t she sense my anxiety? I was irritated with her until I saw her retrieve my satchel and her purse. The driver held the car door open as we both waited on her to run back to us, while the workman boarded the still-running plane. He waved his red flag one more time as he taxied back toward an old barn.

Hurry driver!

It would only be a fifteen minute drive to the hospital, but each of the minutes were precious and could be my father’s last. When we stopped to wait for a blasted train, my mind filled with fears that we wouldn’t make it in time.

Hurry!

To our luck, it was only an engine with a few cars, but damn it, the driver could have made it across if he’d been going faster. Good thing I wasn’t in the driver’s seat.

I didn’t realize I’d said it aloud until Antonia answered, “I’m glad you’re not in the driver’s seat either.” She squeezed my hand softly.

How long had she been holding my hand?

• • •

The driver pulled up to the front of the hospital and I jumped out before he’d made a complete stop. Bounding up the front steps, I ran into the front lobby. A nurse pointed me to where emergency patients

were treated. I tore around the corner, almost knocking over another person. Antonia apologized for me as she ran every bit as fast as I. Robert was up ahead – standing outside of a doorway. He motioned me inside. My breath jagged and uneven, a sob rose in my throat when I saw John, so pale in the bed, his body stone still, lips ice blue. Jane stepped away from his side and I took her place. Laying my head on his chest, I took his blue-white hand in mine. The coolness of his flesh startled me and sent a chill through my heart.

“Dad.” My voice weakened with every breath. “Daddy.”

John’s hand twitched. He took a breath, as if he was trying to say something. Then, as if in silent prayer, his lips moved.

I moved my ear close to his mouth.

“So good to see you, Sister Elizabeth,” he whispered, then took a long, rattled breath.

His body went limp and I watched – felt – the life force flow from the man who’d given me life.

“Oh, my God.” Jane screamed from behind me. “Nurse, get a doctor.” She screamed again, louder. “Get a doctor.”

Standing, I pulled her tight to me as she collapsed into silent tears. Robert rushed into the room and helped me guide her trembling body to a chair.

How could the end be as simple as that? A great man slipped away from us and there was nothing any of us could do about it.

The worst part? I didn’t even know if my father knew I was there. I needed to know that, because the last time I’d seen him we’d had words because he was angry I’d lied about my age to join the service.

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