

Up Near Dallas

Gina Hooten Popp

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ISBN-13: 978-0997955859 ISBN-10: 0997955856

PROLOGUE

Dallas, Texas

Monday Afternoon

March 19, 1934

DR. JEROME LYLES

There are some pains of the body that modern medicine can't heal. The strain on the heart of my best friend and mentor was unbearable. I wanted to step in and help, but I knew the outcome would depend on him. Only he could bring himself back from the brink.

Through observation, I've found, it is those we love most who are capable of inflicting a pain so deep there's almost no recovering from it—especially when the tormentor is your own flesh and blood.

Yet there was nothing I could say to my friend Lucky McLaren, or his wayward son Mick, to make them reconnect, to force them to understand each other. For they were cut from two different cloths. Different enough that they stood independent in thought and appearance, yet sufficiently similar that they couldn't let go of the bond between them.

This morning, I found Mick walking up the road to my house after he'd hopped a freight train from Houston last night. The trek must have exhausted him, as the closest train tracks to us were four miles away. And, of course, he hadn't had the foresight to bring any food with him when he'd stormed out of his father's house. So, he was hungry as a wolf. I heard his stomach rumbling as we stood talking.

Once I got Mick safely inside the door of my modest frame home, my wife Olivia set about fussing over him, feeding him and asking if he wanted a warm bath before he stretched out for a nap. Fretting was second nature to her; it was how she showed her love—and Mick seemed to love her back for it. They didn't have expectations of each other and didn't place any hope on one another. Therefore, they got along famously. Ahh, but that's how it goes.

After he'd polished off the sandwich and cider she'd set out for him, Olivia shooed him off to the bathhouse. "Did you notice how much he resembles his father?" she whispered into my ear before she went to prepare the little guest room off the kitchen for him.

Without answering her directly, I said, "Tell him he's welcome to stay as long as he wants."

Putting on my glasses, I looked for the notes that contained my patients' telephone exchanges and numbers. I took my glasses off again before wiping a tear from the corner of my eye. I needed to call my friend and tell him his son Mick was with me. I knew he'd be worried sick, and I didn't want him to have one more moment of anguish. How could it be that Lucky McLaren had taught me so many lessons, yet he wasn't open to learning a universal truth from me in return? I shook my head.

"Jerome," Olivia called from the doorway. "Come and give me a hand with these sheets. The job is much easier with two people."

"Let me call Mick's parents first."

Olivia moved to the doorway and watched as I picked up the phone and spoke with an operator, who informed me the line was busy.

"You can try again later," Olivia said. "If they don't call first, looking for him."

1 HINDSIGHT IS 20/20

Dallas, Texas

Tuesday Afternoon

March 20, 1934

MARGARET

I hung onto the side of the Model T for dear life as the warm breeze rushed past my face. Looking down at the running board, I could make out the embossed word “FORD.” March in Texas was hot, but not overbearing. I could have walked home from school. Instead, I was riding in style—and boy-o-boy was it funner than just about anything I’d experienced in my fifteen years on this earth.

My thick hair blew wildly as it came loose from its long braid. Mama was going to be hopping mad when she saw me; she was constantly accusing me of being a tomboy, and now I was proving her point. Mama would also tell me “funner” was not a real word. To heck with my mother and her rules.

The red-haired woman in the passenger seat cautioned the driver. “Don’t go too fast, Bud.” I couldn’t help but admire how fashionable she looked with her mouth colored in the latest shade of daring red. Her smile was friendly and inviting. Before she spoke, I would’ve guessed she was down from New York City, but then I heard her faint Texas accent and I suspected she grew up somewhere around Dallas.

“Shoot, I’m not going too fast.” The man slowed his speed to a crawl and yelled at me through the open window. “You got a tight grip, girl?”

I nodded my head as hair whipped in front of my eyes. Shyly, I studied the couple inside the automobile. Their sophistication made me feel nervous and unsure of myself. Though he didn’t have classic good looks, the man had a persuasive charm about him. And he was a fancy dresser too, in his store-bought suit. I wondered what these two made of my homemade school clothes.

Why earlier, when they’d pull up alongside of me walking and asked if I knew of a place where they could rent a couple rooms, I was surprised to find myself

answering. “No hotels or motels this far out in the country, but perhaps my daddy will let you stay in one of the empty cabins he keeps for farm workers. They aren’t much to look at, but they’re clean and comfortable inside.”

I knew it was a bad idea as soon as the words tumbled out of my mouth. But since I’d already said it, I felt I had to follow through on the offer.

At that point in the conversation, the couple asked me to get in their car so they could ride me home and talk to my daddy. But I told them Daddy had a rule that us children were not to get in cars with strangers.

The man—Bud was his name—figured if I rode on the sideboard it wouldn’t really be getting in the car, and I wouldn’t get in trouble. He argued it just wouldn’t be right leaving me to walk while they rode ahead. And I could see his point, even though I knew Daddy probably wouldn’t.

My parents weren’t the kind of folks that took kindly to strangers. Not that we ever had very many strangers stopping by. In fact, I think I’ve known everyone in our near vicinity my whole life.

“I live up the road just apiece,” I hollered though the passenger window. “Turn left at that big oak tree.” Looking up, I admired the green leaves providing a canopy of shade along the way. As I clung to the automobile, I thought of what I’d say when we pulled up to the house. Probably be best to wing it and respond to what my parents said first, I figured.

I was happy to see the driver navigating around the holes in the road, so as not to bounce me off. Part black top and part gravel, the old road to our house had seen more than its fair share of potholes. Perhaps these two people I was bringing home would be a blessing to our family. I didn’t know why Daddy had to be so suspicious of everyone, but I guessed it was related to the hard times going around the country. People were doing things they ordinarily wouldn’t, just to eat and get the basic necessities of life. My mother said these were some of the worst times people had ever seen in the United States.

A dog barked, and I caught a glimpse of it as it ran onto the road from the field. I wasn’t afraid, it was just a blue heeler stray my brother had adopted. She looked fierce, but I knew she was a cream puff. Once she realized it was me hanging on the side of the automobile, her ferocious barking turned to joyful whelps as she

raced alongside us. A sure sign that these two had brought good times and adventure with them.

“What’s your dog’s name?” the woman asked.

“Mollie,” I answered. “Mollie Belle Morningstar, to be exact.”

As we rounded the old oak tree and pulled up the dirt drive, I could see Mama hanging laundry on the line, pristine white sheets flapping around her. Her apron had pockets in front to hold wooden clothespins, so she wouldn’t have to bend over to get more from the woven basket. Daddy had brought that basket home just last week, and Mama had chastised him for spending our cash.

Money. That was all Mama thought about anymore.

Daddy said it was because there was a lot of heartache going around, with people that didn’t have enough, thanks to the drought and banking problems. Especially in the Great Plains states, where people’s crops had dried to a crisp and all but blown away—dust storms carrying off precious topsoil to who knows where.

Things were particularly bad up in Oklahoma. In fact, some of my mother’s people had come down from there just last week looking for work. Daddy didn’t have any work to give, but he put them up in one of our four empty work cabins. Every day they went into town looking for work. Maybe they’d find it. I’d heard tell Dallas had a little more industry than other places.

I prayed my father wouldn’t be mad that I brought this couple to stay in one of the other work cabins. I comforted myself that they would only be here for a short while—at least that’s the impression they’d given me. Maybe they’d even pay Daddy for the cabin. They must have money, judging by their fine clothes and fancy automobile.

“Hey, Mama,” I said. “These nice people need a place to stay for a day or two. I thought maybe they could use one of our worker cabins.”

My mother’s look was stern as she surveyed our visitors, but I pretended not to notice. She walked right past me and extended her hand to the man, who was climbing out of the car behind me. I could see Daddy coming down from the house.

“Ma’am,” the man named Bud said to my mother, “we sure could use some hospitality. We can pay cash for a room and something to eat.”

My father’s long-legged strides brought him up beside the strangers, and he answered for my mother. “We have an open cabin.” He gestured to the side of the long dirt drive. “You can pull your automobile up to the front. Or you can leave it parked here. If it starts to rain hard, you might consider moving it up to the main road so you won’t get stuck in the mud.”

Tall and muscular, my father was a quiet man who didn’t startle easily. It wasn’t like him to rattle on. I wondered if he was shocked by the arrival of the visitors and had lost his wits, or if something else had occurred that I didn’t know about. He certainly wasn’t acting like himself.

“Gerald.” My mother gently touched his arm. “Let’s take a moment to introduce ourselves.” Standing ramrod straight, she turned to the couple. “I’m Ruth Morningstar, and this is my husband Gerald. I suppose you’ve already met our daughter Margaret.” Always proper, Mama knew exactly what to do in any social situation. Even though her wheat-colored hair was falling out of its up-do, she looked the perfect hostess.

The newcomer took my mother’s extended hand again. “I’m Bud, and this is my wife Doreen.” My father quietly shook Bud and Doreen’s hands in turn.

“Well, now.” My mother gestured to the small cabin. “Let’s get you two settled in. I’ll have Margaret bring you over some stew and bread for supper.”

“We only have the one suitcase and a travel satchel.” Bud pulled the case from the back of the automobile. “I can manage it all myself.”

I looked over at Doreen, who looked sickly in the sunlight. And even though it was too warm for the light sweater she was wearing, I noticed she grasped it closed in front as if she were chilled to the bone. I called out as my father ushered them up the dirt drive to the cabin’s door. “Should I bring some fresh sheets and blankets before I bring the stew?”

“No,” Daddy said without turning around. “Your sister Samantha washed all the blankets last week to get ready for the workers’ return. Everything should be clean and ready for our guests.”

His words were kind, but his tone was strained. I blamed his uneasiness around strangers for his unusual behavior. After they entered the cabin, I turned to go up to our house. I could smell the stew simmering as I came in, but I knew it would be some time before it was ready to eat.

“Goodness grief,” I said looking at the clock hanging on the wall. “It’s almost four o’clock!”

Mother handed me a plate of sugar cookies. “Why don’t you take these to our guests, to tide them over until dinner time. Tell them the stew will be ready in about an hour.”

Once outside, the sweet smell of honeysuckle on a fence line near our kitchen door wafted toward me. A bee buzzed nearby, traveling among the blossoming vines. The new grass felt cool and springy beneath my bare feet, as I had rid myself of my shoes as soon as I got home from school. It was a glorious warm day, yet for some reason I felt a chill as I headed toward the workers’ cabin.

Without knocking, I jerked the sturdy wooden door open and went inside with my plate full of cookies. As I whipped the linen tea towel off to present my gift, I noticed that everyone in the room was stone still.

“Stew will be ready in an hour,” I chirped in my brightest voice. “Here are some just-baked cookies to tide you over until then.”

“Thank you, Margaret.” My father took the plate from me. “Now run on back up to the big house and help your mama.”

I looked from my father to Doreen, who was lying on the bed with her head propped on the pillows. Her sweater hung on a nearby chair. A bright splotch of blood seeped through a cotton bandage under her sheer blouse. A shudder of fear rippled over me. No wonder she was so pale—she was wounded!

“What on earth?” I heard myself exclaim.

I looked back at the man named Bud and froze. He was holding a gun on my father.

My father spoke without emotion. “Please go back up to the big house with your mother. I’m going to fetch Dr. Lyles, to help our guest.”

“No,” the man said. “You’re going to stay here. Your daughter will bring the doctor.”

“Please,” said my father. “Leave my daughter out of this.”

“No sir, you can’t be trusted. I know your type. You’ll head straight to the police, tell them who we are . . . You fancy yourself a good citizen, a Bible-fearing man. Am I right Margaret? Does your father always do the right thing?”

I couldn’t answer, my heart was pounding too hard. I could feel the blood rushing in my ears.

Then much to my surprise, Bud turned his gun toward me. “Run along now, Margaret.” He said the words as if we’d known each other our whole lives. “Doreen needs you to get the doctor and bring him back to the cabin pronto. Don’t stop to tell your mother what you’re doing.”

As I turned to open the door, the man redirected the gun back to my father. Daddy’s face registered little emotion; he simply sat down in a chair near the end of the bed. Yes, my father was a good man, just as Bud had declared earlier. But he was also a brave man. And I knew I had to be brave, too.

As I moved toward the cabin door, my father called out in a soft tone. “Take Gil. He’s the fastest of our horses. And”—he hesitated—“be certain to tell Dr. Lyles what he’s getting himself into here.”

“Shut up, old man! Your daughter didn’t recognize us and the doctor won’t either if you keep your trap shut.”

“Tell Dr. Lyles, Margaret.” My father’s voice held a serious tone.

“Don’t you say a thing, girl! Or your father won’t live to see tomorrow.”

Before I could get all the way through the door, the stranger grabbed my arm near the elbow and gave it a twist. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes.” My voice quivered as his hold grew tighter. I tried to sound brave. “Just let my father go, I’ll bring the doctor.”

He let my arm fall. “Do as I say and your Pa will be waiting here when you get back.”

The outlaw pointed the gun straight at my father's chest. "We'll be waiting right here. Won't we, Mr. Morningstar?"

MICK

Running to Dallas hadn't been so much of a conscious decision as it had been a natural choice. I loved music, and the chance to be near some of the best musicians in the world was just too much. My father would never understand, so I didn't tell him. Just hopped a passing train and rode through the night.

But now that I'd made it as far as Dr. Lyles's house just outside of Dallas, I was rethinking my hasty exit. I knew my mother would be worried half to death about me by now, and she already had so much stress in her life what with my little sister still recovering from polio. That's the real reason I agreed to let Dr. Lyles call my father to tell him I was safe, and that I'd decided to live with their family for a while.

I like the idea of living with the Lyles. The doctor's wife, Olivia, said if I liked music there was plenty at their church. She'd added that if I lived with them, she'd expect me to go with the family to church services every time the doors opened. Her terms for staying seemed simple enough. I'd figure out how to get out of the churchgoing after I settled into my life here.

Sitting at the kitchen table, eavesdropping on Dr. Lyles's phone conversation, I listened as he smoothed out the rift between my father and me that seemed to have been there since the day I was born. I swear, the doctor should've been a diplomat. My anger subsided. It occurred to me that my father and I were both right on certain issues, and that the blow-up between us two nights ago hadn't been all that bad.

Truly, there was healing magic in the doctor's words. He was a natural-born peacemaker. Perhaps his calming influence was the reason why I'd headed his way in the middle of the night, when I didn't know where else to turn. Though he was a close friend of my father, I knew he'd never turn me out. In fact, he didn't even question why I'd arrived on his doorstep.

Looking up, I gazed out the window at the serene farmland. In the distance, I could see a girl on a horse, headed our way. Dr. Lyles had his back to the window as he said his goodbye in the phone receiver, but his wife was fully aware of the rider's approach. She glided across the linoleum floor to pull back the lace curtains. Mentally, she seemed to be preparing for whatever news the girl on the

horse would bring. I guess this was the way it was for doctor's families. Emergency situations bearing down on them at any given moment.

"Jerome," she called to her husband without turning then raised her voice an octave. "Jerome, Margaret's riding across the field like there's no tomorrow." The doctor automatically started to pack his medical bag. "I'll get your suit coat and hat," Olivia said as she assisted him.

To my surprise, the doctor addressed me. "Mick, I think everything's going to be all right between you and your father. Just remember, you two aren't enemies—you just have different priorities. He loves you very much. That's why he's going to let you stay here."

The way he said it made complete sense. I didn't try to engage him further.

Without being asked, Olivia took his wireframe eyeglasses to the sink and began to clean them. "I'll put some of these peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in your bag," she said as she dried his glasses on a clean tea towel. "Don't want your diabetes to start acting up because you're not eating on schedule."

Dr. Lyles moved to a tall wooden cabinet and got out two bottles of rubbing alcohol from the top shelf. As he bent to place them in his medical bag, I could see the gleaming barrel of a gun peeking out from where he had just removed the bottles. Deftly, he covered the weapon with a few rolls of cotton gauze before turning to give Olivia a quick kiss goodbye.

MARGARET

I spurred Gil to go faster now that we were out in the open land and Dr. Lyles's house was in sight. I was glad to see the doctor's work truck parked under the side portico. Two of his children played on the front lawn.

"Jenny Leigh," I cried as I reached hearing distance. "Is your father home? I need to talk with him."

The slender girl clutched her doll to her chest. "He's here." She ran to the screen door and called inside. "Father, come quick! Miss Margaret needs you."

To my surprise, a dark-haired boy with bluish-gray eyes stepped out of the door. His wavy hair lifted in the breeze as he moved to the end of the porch. He looked to be about my own age, maybe a year or two older. I was sure I'd never met him as he wasn't one of those people you'd easily forget. Certainly, he wasn't from around here. When the boy saw I was looking directly at him, he winked and flashed a flirtatious smile—a pirate's smile, if you will. I wasn't sure I'd really seen it, considering I was obviously having some sort of emergency situation.

Before I could react to the stranger, I heard Dr. Jerome Lyles's deep voice saying, "I'm coming. Let me get my medical bag and hat."

I surveyed the two little female faces looking up at me. The older sister that had spoken earlier watched me intently as she held the tiny hand of a much smaller girl behind her skirt. The boy with the dark, wavy hair was watching me as well. He certainly had a confident air about him.

Breaking the silence, Jenny Leigh spoke. "This here's the son of one of Pa's closest friends," the girl said. "His name is Mick McLaren. He's from Houston, down near the Gulf."

"It's very nice to meet you." I nodded in his direction before gazing back down at the two children. I suddenly developed a twisting knot in my stomach. I knew I was leading their father into trouble. It would be wrong not to tell him the two fugitives were holding my father hostage so that I would bring a doctor.

Why-oh-why hadn't I recognized Bud and Doreen earlier? I remembered I'd seen a newspaper clipping of the woman once. But she looked so different in person—smaller, frailer. Still, I should've realized it was her. But I wasn't expecting to

encounter a notorious person on my walk home from school. Nothing bad ever happened in these parts.

Still, she'd called him by his well-known nickname "Bud" when we first met. Perhaps she didn't know he'd be asking to stay at our place. As lost in my thoughts as I was at that moment, I couldn't take my eyes off the little girls. Babies really.

"What is it, Margaret?" The harried doctor flew through the screen door holding his hat, coat, and medical bag. His chiseled face boasted high cheekbones and soft, dark eyes. Without a second's hesitation, he came up to the side of my horse and gently stroked the stallion's neck.

"There's a problem at our house. A lady's been shot in her upper arm, near her chest. She's lost a lot of blood and is possibly going into shock." I hesitated before continuing. Fear flickered behind the doctor's dark eyes as my words registered with him.

Glancing at the two little ones who still stood within hearing distance, I whispered, "There's a man with her. He's holding a gun on my father until I bring a doctor. I believe they might be the outlaws we've heard so much about lately."

Our eyes met once again. The flicker of fear had been replaced with the confidence of a man on a mission. I knew he had made the decision to not only save the woman's life, but my father's as well. I let go of the ragged breath I'd been holding.

"Girls," the doctor said without looking back, "Go inside and tell your mamma I might be a while. Possibly all night."

The girls did as they were told. Guilt plucked at my very core. Perhaps I shouldn't have asked their father for help. Perhaps I should've ridden straight to Sheriff Green.

The dark-haired boy still stood by the door. I felt certain he'd heard at least some of what I'd said in confidence to the doctor, but it couldn't be helped. Time was of the essence.

Dr. Lyles turned to me. "May I ride your horse? The trip will be a lot faster across the fields than taking the winding country road."

As I got down from my mount, the doctor turned his attention to the boy on his porch. “Mick, will you drive Miss Morningstar to her home in my truck. I’ll meet the two of you there.”

He turned the horse toward our farm and rode like the wind, his lean form and the horse’s muscular body melding into one as they raced across the land. He’d be at our house in no time flat.

I’d heard through our small town’s grapevine, Dr. Lyles had learned to ride from a physician he trained under in West Texas, a legendary Texas doctor named Jackson Roland who went by the nickname “Dr. Dean.” Seems this man had mentored Dr. Lyles from a young age, and had taught him just about everything he knew. When the boy was old enough, he’d sent him to medical school. One couldn’t help but admire Dr. Lyles’s skill with the horse. I hoped I’d done the right thing bringing him to the wounded woman.

Staring at the black dirt on top of my bare feet, I heard the screen door open and slam behind me. I turned to see Dr. Lyles’s wife in the doorway, a set of keys dangling from her extended hand. “Mick will drive you home,” she said with a strained smile.

The boy stepped forward and took the keys from her. “May I take Dr Lyles’s gun?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Carrying a firearm into a tense situation is just asking for trouble.” It was at that moment I realized I’d been talking to the doctor near the open window of his kitchen. She must’ve been listening to what I told him. I didn’t blame her for eavesdropping; she needed to know what was happening.

“Please.” He gently took her arm. “I’m real good with a gun.”

She must have relented because he walked back into the house and came out with a pistol. Turning to me, he said the most peculiar thing, “Margaret, let’s go assist Dr. Lyles with his patient.” I didn’t know what to say, so I just took his extended arm and let him guide me to the passenger side of the truck.

The truck’s interior was immaculate, not a scrap of paper or a bit of dust. Someone had polished all the controls until they gleamed. Looking at this boy who was barely older than me, I couldn’t imagine he knew how to drive. But he

seemed very proficient at it as he steered the rumbling automobile back down toward the dirt road.

As he carefully avoided any bumps in the truck's path, he asked, "Is your house the big white one just off the main road?"

I felt suddenly timid. "Yes." But I had to warn him, too. "Did you hear what I said to Dr. Lyles earlier?"

"I did." He spoke matter-of-factly.

"You can let me off near the front gate and turn around and go back to the Lyles' house. No one would blame you for doing the sane thing."

He rolled to a smooth stop in front of the row of work cabins and said, "Go on into the cabin and let them know I dropped you off." A shock of fear jolted through me as I realized he was going to go back. But I recovered quickly and opened the door to get out.

He reached over and caught me by the elbow—the same arm the outlaw had twisted earlier. I felt a sharp pain.

"I'm going to back out of the drive and park up the road." He pointed over his shoulder. "I'll sneak up on the west side of the cabin, by way of that thick stand of trees. Don't let on I'm outside. Just make an excuse to open the far side window, if it's not already open, so I can hear what's happening."

"Sure thing." My voice squeaked. "I can do that."

I closed the door and looked at him through the lowered window, mouthing a *thank you* before turning toward the first workhouse. Wooden legs carried me to the door, where I rapped softly. The door swung open, revealing a sight that would be forever ingrained in my memory.

Dr. Lyles was removing the bullet from the woman's arm. Blood flowed freely over the light-colored towels he'd placed underneath his makeshift surgical area. On the bedside table I saw ether and a man's handkerchief. The woman's face appeared pale and lifeless against the plush pillows. She looked as though she were being prepared for eternal rest.

Bud loomed behind Dr. Lyles. The doctor was certainly aware he was being held at gunpoint, but he didn't waver as he attempted to save the woman's life. My father quietly observed from the corner.

Dr. Lyles turned to him. "Gerald, would you come hold this gauze in place?" He acted as if he were asking Papa to pass the peas at the dinner table. In a split second my father was beside Dr. Lyles.

"Hold it like this," the doctor instructed while he started to wrap the bandage. Slowly, carefully, he wound the gauze around the woman's arm, making certain not to get it too tight.

"Margaret," Dr. Lyles called over his shoulder, "look in my medical bag and bring me the black leather pouch that holds my scissors.

After a few seconds of fumbling, I found what he wanted and approached the bedside where he worked. To my relief, I saw the woman's chest moving up and down—but just barely.

As I removed the scissors from their pouch, her eyelashes fluttered. She gently coughed. Color returned, first to her lips and then to her cheeks. It was like watching sleeping beauty come to life again after being kissed. Except, of course, one would be hard-pressed to imagine Bud as a prince. I had no doubts the rogue would shoot anyone who got in his way.

I noticed, then, the lace curtains billowing in the open window behind the gunmen. "May I open the window further to get more air flowing in here?"

Bud stepped aside and let me pass, but not for a second did he lower his gun. I guess that's how it was for a person who lived their life outside the law. They could never put their guard down, even for a second. I almost felt sorry for him.

Or, at least, I felt some pity for Doreen as I watched Dr. Lyles take her pulse. The doctor was absorbed in his work he didn't seem to notice the danger around him.

My father, of course, was stoic as always. I wish I could be so brave.

MICK

It didn't take me long after I parked the truck down the road to move back up along the treeline by the fence, sneaking through lush low-lying brush. There were a couple of cedar trees just behind the work cabin that provided perfect cover, but they were positioned too far from the window for me to hear the conversation inside.

I sidled up to the side of the cabin and positioned myself under the window. As I'd requested, Margaret had made sure it was open. Leaning against the whitewashed wood planks that covered the outer wall, I tried to make as little noise as possible. When I put my palm down to balance myself, the earth felt springy to the touch. Above, I heard a man talking.

"I'm mighty surprised to find a black doctor here," the outlaw said matter-of-factly.

"I need to wash up." I recognized Dr. Lyles's steady voice. He wasn't the least perturbed by the comment.

"I'll get a bucket of fresh water from the well," Margaret said.

The door squeaked open and closed again. Then an older man, who I assumed was Margaret's father said, "You're lucky Dr. Lyles was willing to save your friend, considering what it might do to his reputation. A lesser man might not have helped."

No one spoke for the next few minutes. A bee hummed, feasting on a rose bush. A bird chirped in the trees overhead, and the eternal rhythm of the cicadas filled the air. I hadn't felt this alive in a long, long time, and it scared me.

Creeping around the corner of the cabin, I watched Margaret at the well. Her movements were graceful, though she was more of a tomboy type than a fru-fru girl. The kind of girl my older brother André would call "spunky." She had outdoor, healthy good looks.

Margaret caught sight of me watching her. She startled but quickly recovered. I gave a slight wave and slipped back around the cabin's corner, positioning myself underneath the open window again and listening intently.

"I don't think the patient should travel for at least a week," I heard the doctor say.

“We need to get on the road right after we eat.” Bud’s voice sounded worn out. I could hear him pacing the floor in front of the window.

A woman’s voice hollered on the other side of the cabin door. “Open up, I’ve brought stew and biscuits for your dinner.” I heard the old door creak open. “Dr. Lyles.” The woman sounded surprised. “I didn’t know you were visiting. Let me go back up to the house for another dish.”

“I don’t need a bowl.” The doctor called out to the porch: “Margaret, step on in here with that bucket of water! As soon as I clean my hands, I’ll be on my way.”

Bud’s voice was hard again. “No one is leaving until I say so.

I heard Mrs. Morningstar gasp. “What’s happening here? Why is Doreen bleeding?”

“Ma’am, please stop asking questions.” To my surprise, Bud’s voice came softer and more in control now. “Just pour me up a bowl of stew, and I’ll have a couple biscuits to go for Doreen when she wakes up.”

“I wouldn’t move her.” The doctor spoke as he splashed his hands in the water.

“It ain’t your decision to make. Too many people in this here cabin could turn us in to the Sheriff, if we don’t keep going.”

“Then let me go with you,” the doctor reasoned. “At least for the next twenty-four hours. You’ll need someone to watch her while you drive, to help if the bleeding gets worse.”

“You have a point,” Bud said between mouthfuls. “I was thinking I needed to take someone to keep Mr. Morningstar here from blabbing after we’re gone. But I wasn’t thinking of taking you, doctor. I was thinking of taking Margaret here. No way would the Morningstars risk their dear daughter’s life. Taking Margaret is my best insurance policy.”

Mrs. Morningstar started to cry.

Margaret said, “don’t worry, Mother. I can find my way back home after Miss Doreen is up and about.” Margaret moved closer to the open window. “You do plan to let me go, don’t you?”

“I haven’t thought this through yet,” Bud said as he continued to chew. “Right now, I need a drink. Doctor, give me that there bottle of whiskey you got in your bag.”

“Go easy on it, son.” The doctor’s voice sounded far away. “Your girl’s going to need it for pain when she starts coming ’round.”

ANTONIA

When the phone rang earlier, I knew it would be news about our son Mick. He'd left two days ago, and he'd never been gone that long before without letting us know his whereabouts. But this time, his leaving felt different. The heated exchange between him and his father had almost come to blows.

I couldn't understand why Mick railed so hard against our life. He'd made it clear he wanted no part of his father's wealth. No, he wanted to ramble about the country, singing and playing the guitar.

Hiding outside my husband Lucky's office, I listened to his end of the phone conversation. Judging by the relieved tone in Lucky's voice, it was good news about our boy. A couple of phrases were said loud enough that I could piece together he was talking to our longtime family friend, Dr. Lyles. I heard Lucky murmur a "yes" and, "If that's what he wants." Then, abruptly, he hung up the phone.

I rushed into the room, unable to contain my excitement.

"Was that Dr. Lyles? Did Mick go to Dallas?"

"Yes," Lucky's face held a concerned look. "He's going to be staying with the doctor's family for a few weeks. With spring break around the corner, he won't miss much school."

"Was there something wrong that made you hang up so fast?"

"The doctor was needed for an emergency. I didn't want to detain him. He was kind enough to call and tell us our son is safe. We don't want to drag him any further into our problems."

Lucky was seated on a sofa, staring out the window at the landscaped grounds of our estate. He selected this room for his office because of the view, though he told everyone it was because it was the furthest from the kitchen noise. Whatever, it was a calming place to think things through.

I sat down on an ottoman near him. "Come," he patted the seat beside himself.

I rose and went to the velvet sofa. Lucky put his arm around me, squeezing me like he used to when we were younger.

“Now, wouldn’t our lives be boring if we didn’t have Mick to shake things up? André is a good boy, but you have to admit he’s short on excitement.”

“What are you saying?” Even though I’d left Italy twenty years ago, I still had occasional trouble keeping up with Lucky.

“Let’s just say if I get a call from the police in the middle of the night, I never worry that André’s in trouble.”

“Of course not, silly. That would be Mick they’re calling about.”

Sighing heavily, Lucky rose and went to his desk. “I’m so relieved to know he’s staying with the Lyles. Maybe the doctor will talk some sense into him.”

I stood and looked out over the freshly mowed lawn. A rabbit nibbled in the flower beds. “I don’t know, trouble seems to follow Mick. I won’t rest easy until he’s home.”

MARGARET

My mother asked Bud if she could go get my shoes and a change of clothes from the big house. For a moment, I thought he was going to let her. Then he changed his mind. “Just give her your shoes, you look about the same size.”

He paced near the open window. My mother crossed the small room of the workers’ cabin and gently moved my father from the straight-back chair. Sitting down herself, she slowly removed her shoes, delaying my leaving as long as possible.

My stomach was a nervous mess. I almost jumped out of my skin when Dr. Lyles touched my shoulder and pointed to the table. “Margaret,” he said, “hand me that basket your mother carried the biscuits and dishes in earlier. I want to put some bandages and ointment in it. You’ll need to dress the patient’s wound at least once a day for the next few days.”

I brought the basket to him.

“Don’t pull the bandages too tight.” He said as he put the medicine, bandages, and a pair of scissors in the basket. “Watch for redness and infection.”

My father calmly walked over, picked up my mother’s shoes, and brought them to me. As I put them on, my mother took off her sweater. Lightweight and the color of butter, it was her favorite. She handed the sweater to my father, and he took it to where Dr. Lyles stood beside the basket. With a sideways glance, I saw Dr. Lyles’s hand reach into his medical bag and deftly pull out a scalpel. He slipped it in between the folds of the sweater my father was positioning on top of the other items in the basket.

At the same moment, my mother clumsily knocked Bud’s empty stew bowl off the table onto the wooden floor. It clattered at his feet and broke into three large pieces. Jumping back, he moved his hand down. For the first time since I’d entered the cabin, his gun wasn’t trained on one of us.

I heard a rustle outside the window. A hand with a gun moved into view.

“Put your weapon down and your hands up.”

Bud didn’t turn to see who the deep male voice belonged to. “I know you ain’t the police,” he said calmly. “The police would’ve already shot me dead.”

As Bud stooped to drop his gun on the floor, he turned and fired straight through the open window. Outside, the rose bush exploded in a mass of crimson blooms.

The door beside me whipped open, and Mick entered with his pistol trained on Bud. Bud turned his gun right back at the boy.

The two stood in a face-off. No one dared speak.

Then, Doreen surprised us all by sitting up and saying in a drowsy voice. “Bud, do you know who this boy is? He’s the second son of oilman Lucky McLaren—one of the wealthiest men in Texas.”

She propped herself up further in the bed and gave Mick a once over. This time, when she spoke, her voice was stronger. “I saw this boy and his family in the newspapers just the day before yesterday. I think his father may be running for governor.”

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2016 NEW APPLE ANNUAL BOOK AWARDS MEDALIST WINNER. Life isn't easy when you have as many obstacles to overcome as fourteen-year-old Chico Boy has in his life. For starters, his Dad left over a year ago and he's fallen behind in school. And even though his mother works hard at her waitressing job, she's barely able to cover the family's expenses. Things like new underwear and tennis shoes fall far down on the list of essentials when compared to gas, food and rent. And now to top it all off, he and his best friend Talula think they've witnessed a possible murder. But take heart, not all is bad for Chico Boy. He has a great group of friends and an indomitable spirit that keeps him bouncing high on the pogo stick of life.