

Elisabeth Lee

A CARLYLE HUDSON NOVEL



FOR GLORY

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I deal with other people by keeping secrets. Bottom line: I do not like people knowing what I do for a living, how much money I make, my age, or marital status. The answers—gamble, six to seven figures (depending on how well the cards fall), fifty, and not interested in marriage—always raise more questions. Even well intentioned people seem to feel entitled to that information, which irritates the hell out of me. So I lie. It entertains me, keeps my energy positive and my creativity high. In the rare instance that idle curiosity turns into some sort of friendship, I'll buy you a drink, confess the truth, and see how you take it. Most people are good sports. Once they know me, I think they understand the lies. They think of it as misdirection. I think of it as acting. All good poker players act. I am a very good poker player.

Right now I have two problems. I'm on a losing streak and I'm in Kansas.

I never expected to stay. It was, after all, Kansas. I had sworn never. Never, never, never. Except for the odd visit over a long weekend around a family ritual like Christmas or a birthday ending in zero—my mom’s, not mine. I avoid zeros. And birthdays. And until now, my mom. The hell of it is, she died, and now I’m here. In Kansas. It looks like I’ll have to stay, for a while anyway. Until the cards change. Until I can figure out how to leave. Kansas. Damn.

We would have had Christmas a few weeks ago: mom, her sisters, and me. It had become a ladies-only event in the last few years, the result of sundry break-ups, separations, divorces, disappearances, hospitalization, and death. Bottom line is that men did not last with the women in our family. We think of ourselves as bigger than life, something like a unified force of nature. When we aren’t *at* each other. Or depressed. Hudson women tend toward depression. Before anti-depressants, the antidote was to pick up and leave. *Ms. Hudson has left the building*. Poof. Gone.

But I skipped the Hudson Christmas this year. I took Chas to a private Costa Rican villa I rented for the holiday. He was alone and I owed him the fabulous view of the Pacific and there was a casino in town. But that’s another story.

Damn Louise. I wasn’t ready for her to be dead. I should have been here for Christmas, for Christ’s sake. Talking, for a change, laughing, enjoying keeping company. That’s what we call it, “keeping company,” *hang-ing out* has the wrong feel. People Louise’s age did not hang out, thank you very much. She left me with a house I am damn well not going to live in and a business I certainly don’t want. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

I had been back in San Francisco maybe ten days.

The trip hadn't exactly paid for itself. Too little time on the beach, too much time at the tables, losing. But a reasonably good time with a good friend. I'd had enough time to sift the spam from my email, pay bills, reconnect with friends, and break up with the latest man after two days' of steam and massage up in Napa. I was in the middle of figuring out whether to be depressed or happy about it when the phone chirped and my aunt Luce told me Louise was gone.

"She left? Just like that?"

"Let's try again, Lyle," she said. "What is the first thing I said when you answered the phone? Think about it."

"How's the weather? Shit." *How's the weather* is family code for *somebody died*. "Dead?" I stopped breathing. I was confused. Someone in the room was moaning and making choking noises.

"Lyle, sweetie? You OK? Listen up..."

"Luce, I can't. Can't..." Words would not come. "I'll call you back."

That was weeks ago. Lots of blank spaces since then, gray air. Luce handled arrangements. Louise had insisted on cremation. No viewing. A service at her Episcopal church. There was no rush. I changed my life and left San Francisco, everything I needed in the back of my car. Flying might have made more sense, but I wanted time alone, wanted to have the car with me, my car, not some creepy rental out of KCI.

My car is an Infiniti G35 Coupe—Liquid Platinum on the outside, soft leather and rosewood within. 298 horses push her to Mach speed on the prairies. She's as quiet as a purr, guaranteed to get attention. Valet guys love her.

I traversed the Sierras and arrived in Reno with

some difficulty. The G35 isn't a car of choice for driving in snow, and a winter storm was dropping in from the north. I-80 would be closed all the way to Salt Lake. And I wanted to take Route 50 due East, two lanes, begging for the solitude of the high desert and the absence of semis on a long haul. I'd have to wait for the plows so I dropped in on my friends at the Peppermill hotel-casino, not so much for the ambience as knowing I'd get comped—a free stay for reliable players, whatever “reliable” means in a world built of cards.

I finished fourth in my first tournament there three years ago. Risked a dime to enter and added a zero to it in five days, well, nights of hard work. World Poker, no-limit-Texas-hold-em before it hit television and the web and everybody decided they'd be the next champion.

The storm forced me to stay three nights with cold cards. I lost about \$3,000 a night.

When the road was mostly clear it took two slow days to drive across a couple deserts and pass through the Rocky Mountains. The G35 wanted to run, but I couldn't. I talked to Louise, tried to come to terms with her abrupt departure. Luce had said they didn't know why she died. “At home” was all she told me.

Too late for Denver, I pulled off of I-70 on the descent from the Eisenhower tunnel and cut over to Central City where the casinos are cut into the canyon. But my luck was worse than sour. I lost \$5,000 in an hour and called it quits. Walked away from the free room and got back in the car. I'd drive straight through to Lawrence.

Driving that car, I was locked in a solitude that scared the hell out of me. With the sun rising over the Flint Hills I howled, I raved, I begged the Deity to let me wake up. The daughter in me expected to have time

left with Louise for us to build a relationship. Even this late in the game, it was my dream. And now, nothing. I felt numb. The constant weeping terrified me. Truth is, part of me was just getting started.

The service went well, considering there was no casket, no cemetery. In our shock, we behaved ourselves. Mostly. Hudsons don't do death well; we take it personally. Lack dignity, blurt things out unexpectedly. Mutter under our breath. We brood and drink a lot, both before and after a funeral. Which is not cool when you're taking antidepressants. The hangover is not bad at all, but there are a few...gaps...in the memory, and I have to tip-toe around, sleuthing out what I might have said. Due to the degree of shock we were experiencing, for Louise's funeral we went easy on each other. Behaved ourselves in the presence of patient Father Bob. Tried to take it slow. Which is how I ended up staying at my mother's house with my Aunt Luce.

My aunt's name is Lucille Hudson. My mother's name was Louise. She and her sisters all had names starting with L: Louise, Lucille, Loretta, and Lenore. Except for mom, they gave their daughters L-names, too. Tribal tradition. Maybe not a tribe, a clan? But we feel like a tribe and all like the word. Hudson women are sensitive to words. More on that later.

My name is Carlyle Hudson. My aunts called me Lyle, so I ended up with an L-name after all, just like the rest. These days, every one of us has silver hair. Mine is silky, quite long, and reaches well below my shoulder blades. We share another trait, as well. When the men disappear or leave or die, we take our name back, become Hudsons again. It suits us just fine.

So here I was, in Kansas, and all bets were off. It was spooky to be in that house without my mother, like vis-

iting a museum of my own past. The physical evidence of the woman, the things she touched and lived with, everyday things, seemed wrapped in time, artifacts of a lost world. Which indeed they were.

It's a big old house and stands in the middle of a shady street in Old West Lawrence. A large Victorian, red brick, with a porch that wraps around the front of the house, it was built in a time before air-conditioning when families sat outside and drank lemonade and fanned themselves to keep cool. The ceilings are high, the windows tall, and over the front door is a stained glass fan light that spilled dollops of light on the wood floor every afternoon. The silence and peace of the place suited my mother. In a house like this, she once said, you don't rush. So slow down, please. If the house spoke, it was with her voice.

After the funeral the days passed slowly. Most of my time was spent throwing out casseroles left by well meaning neighbors. I often found myself standing in the front room at the large main window, looking out across the porch at my car parked by the curb. To park in back, off the alley by the door would have meant I was moving in. Looking at the car out in the street reassured me, let me know I was just visiting. I love that car, love to drive, and I was brooding about leaving when Luce walked in from the kitchen.

Of my three aunts, she seemed most different, most herself. She has the basic Hudson build: 5' 7", not lean but not in the neighborhood of plump either. Luce always moves with the confidence of good health and has the grace of a much younger woman. You'd never know she's seventy. Unlike her sisters, Luce wears her silver-blond hair short, an inverted bob with longer pieces of hair in front that tended to waviness. It makes her look both sleek and playful. When she tosses her head to

make a point, her hair always goes back to where it belongs. Luce likes to wear a small, colorful scarf around her neck that can be tied up to keep her hair back. The woman is groomed!

I grew up being curious about her and felt she was curious about me. That, too, was something I thought about as we sat together. Wondered. Mutual regard deepened into a closeness that still means a great deal to both of us, though we'd rather be bludgeoned than talk about it. My eyes were practically closed when Luce cleared her throat. Just get it out, Luce.

"Now, Lyle," Luce began, in a voice as quiet as if she were speaking to herself. "I want you to know I have no expectations. You take time, decide what it is you want to do." With the house, she meant. Oh, God, the house.

"And you can do that pretty much anywhere you want, go back West—" My aunt did not like the words *California* or *San Francisco*. Refused to say them. It's that word-aversion thing I mentioned earlier. "—or take some time in Mexico, whatever. That's OK. But I want you to know, and I'm sure you do, that this house is yours and always will be. I'm going to look after the house, pay bills, sort things out at the shop, and help with the legalities of your mother's estate. I have talked to the girls—" she referred to Lenore and Loretta, Louise's twin sisters "—and they are fine. Louise's will was clear on what she left to them, and they're happy, if that's the word for it. Lenore was pretty broken up; she thought she'd be the one to leave stuff to Lou."

This was a pretty long speech for Luce. She was not much on lengthy pronouncements. At this point, she stopped speaking. I suppose she was full of feeling for her sisters, the living and the dead. She cleared her throat and continued.

“So, there is no need right now to go through closets, attics, cedar chests, you know—stuff in the house, generally. Nor the shop, either.” Mom left me the shop, too. A bridal shop, for God’s sake! What was she thinking?

“I’m going to stick around, as I said. My place is fifteen minutes away. We can talk things over whenever you want.”

“Luce, I...” My voice got husky. “I do want to leave, you’re right. But I just can’t decide. It makes no sense, you know?” I walked over from the window and sat down, hands clenched. “They don’t *know*? They don’t know what killed her? No apparent cause? She was a healthy 72-year-old woman! How could she just die? No flu, no stroke, no heart attack? Just die?” By then I knew the details. Luce had found Lou lying peacefully in her bed. But it still made no sense to me. I set my jaw and turned around. “I don’t think I’ll be leaving just yet.”

My aunt regarded me with her sharp, gray-green eyes, smiling at me with them. “So stay.” The words hung there. “I’ll take Lou’s room for the time being, and you can keep yours.” Luce lived in her own house across town, but was offering moral support that I needed just then.

My room is not really *my* room, but it is the one I take when I visit Louise. Visited.

“Good. That’s settled, then.” We moved to the kitchen for tea. Earl Gray, raw sugar, two percent milk. We sat at Louise’s table and stared at the teapot, waiting for it to steep.

“About Glory,” Luce began.

My eyes widened in disbelief, the sudden realization that I had been set up, *bushwhacked* by my aunt. Again. If I hadn’t been so pissed off, I might have

smiled at her technique.

“No! No Way!”

“There was no provision in the will, you know. I suspect Louise expected to outlive her.” This said quietly while pouring our tea with a delicate, opinionated hand.

I stood up, slammed over to the wall between the back window and the fridge and beat my forehead rhythmically against the wallpaper. “No, no, no, no, no!” It wasn’t that I hated the dog, exactly. But she set my teeth on edge. A purebred, small-boned, Smooth-haired Fox Terrier, white with black eyes that are full of fire and black, goofy ears, Glory is tightly wound. Affectionate, yes. Obedient, for three seconds. She barks and runs at everything that moves, passers-by, squirrels and birds, wind, rain. She’s been known to climb trees. The damn dog erupts without warning and always makes me jump. I saw myself rapidly disintegrating into a perpetual nervous state with the beast in the house. Hell, my training in the self-control of Aikido, a martial art specializing in higher awareness—not to mention the years of dedication to working out—counted for zip in the face of one small dog. I groaned.

Luce, oddly, didn’t seem to hear. Maybe my aunt was going deaf.

“Carlyle. Come and drink your tea before it gets cold.” The full name an indication of her impatience with my head-banging. “Sit.” I sat. “Glory is sweet natured. That dog loves you. Surely, at least while you are here you can look after her. No need for histrionics.”

“OK. OK. Don’t go judgmental on me. I apologize. It’s just...she doesn’t listen to me the way she listens to you.” Luce met my wheedling tone with a knowing silence. A direct stare over the mug.

“She...she...” I raked a hand through my hair, at a

loss. I did not want to reveal the true source of my resistance to the dog. I released a breath, giving in to my vanity and not willing to explain myself picked up the mug, drank my tea, and looked out the window at Luce's yellow Chevy truck, an unexpected burst of color against the bright snow and bare trees, vintage 1965. February in Kansas. Oh, joy.

A few days later, having successfully postponed a visit from my Aunt Lenore and Aunt Loretta who were increasingly insistent about stopping by, cheering me up, and inundating me with yet more casseroles, I was driving around town, re-orienting myself to streets and neighborhoods. I have lived in so many places that city streets superimpose themselves. I take a left turn that worked in Denver, for example, that gets me nowhere here in Lawrence. Unlike some men I have known, I have no compass, no GPS device lodged in the cerebral cortex or wherever the hell they keep it.

I took the small dog with me. She, too, was suffering from cabin fever. The relentless cold kept her indoors when her natural inclination was "Out." As the day was a brittle 17 degrees, I popped her into the sweater Louise had knit for her, and warmed the Infiniti's passenger seat for her before we took off. So, maybe I liked her a little.

Lawrence is a picturesque little place. Reminds me of Boulder thirty years ago. Even in the gray of late winter, it held a quiet charm. In the middle of the day the students were back in class and off the streets, so I did not have to pray at intersections. Life was good. I was close to smiling. The dog sat contentedly in her sweater, looking around. The woman at the drive-in window at the bank sent her a dog biscuit along with my receipt, and Glory ate it daintily, leaving not a crumb.

On our way back from a visit to Clinton Lake, a quick drive by because of the cold, we parked at a place I know overlooking the lake which was on its way to freezing over. I took keen pleasure in the immensity of the sky, the infinite shades of gray in tune with my desire not to think. Sometimes there are bald eagles here at this time of year. Not today. The world felt empty of people, as if they had simply stepped off the planet, had driven away into another dimension. For a moment the world was empty of everyone except me and this small dog. There were no funerals, no mysterious old lady deaths, no well meaning aunts to wrangle me into staying. OK. Enough of that, Lyle. Back to town. Time to face your life. Yeah, right.

Glory turned her head and looked right at me, as if she could hear the lectures I give myself, and the inevitable, surly skepticism in reply.

“You’re right,” I said to her. “Time to go.”