

FLIGHT  
OF THE  
RED-WINGED  
BLACKBIRD



SUSAN R. LAWRENCE



Scrivenings  
PRESS

Quench your thirst for story.

[www.ScriveningsPress.com](http://www.ScriveningsPress.com)

Copyright © 2022 by Susan R. Lawrence

Published by Scrivenings Press LLC  
15 Lucky Lane  
Morrilton, Arkansas 72110  
<https://ScriveningsPress.com>

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy and recording— without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotation in printed reviews.

Paperback ISBN 978-1-64917-191-7

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-192-4

Editors: K. Banks and Linda Fulkerson

Cover by Linda Fulkerson, [www.bookmarketinggraphics.com](http://www.bookmarketinggraphics.com).

All scriptures are taken from the KING JAMES VERSION (KJV): KING JAMES VERSION, public domain.

All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

*This novel is dedicated to the memory of  
Doris Pauline Berkenbosch Blood.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'm not sure if anyone has publicly thanked a pandemic, but when the world came to a screeching halt in March of 2020, I did what I could do from my little sunshine-yellow office—I wrote a story. Without the shadow of COVID 19, this story may never have been birthed.

Although a story may be written in quarantine, it never becomes a book that way. Thank you to my faithful critique groups: Sharpened Pencils and Word Weavers International, Des Moines Chapter. Your polishing always makes me shine.

Thank you to my dear friends who lived in Des Moines in the 1930s—Bert Borg and Rowena Arnold. Your answers to my questions were always helpful.

Thanks always to my best friend and husband, Gary. From supporting me in the writing to listening to the final product, you have been my helpmate.

Thank you to Scrivenings Press for striving to make my work better, and for the hard work of publication. I truly appreciate all of you.

Thank you to my readers. You are the ones who make this all worthwhile.

Lastly, thank you to the Good Shepherd who has been my faithful and loving guide through writing and life.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

In 1934, a young girl bought cheap dimestore notebooks to use as diaries. She spent her days working long hours as a housekeeper for wealthy home-owners in Des Moines, Iowa. But every night, she would record her thoughts and activities before she slept. Those diaries were hidden away as she married, raised a family, and became elderly.

When my mother died in 2003, I became the owner of the numerous diaries spanning her lifetime. I read them and became enchanted with the idea of a novel, set in the 1930s, with a protagonist who worked as a maid.

*Flight of the Red-winged Blackbird* is not my mother's story, but I drew greedily from those diaries for authenticity. This novel is dedicated to the memory of Doris Pauline Berkenbosch Blood, the writer who filled those precious, old notebooks.

~ Susan R. Lawrence

# PART ONE



# 1



*Grantsville, Iowa, 1932*

**R**uth pushed aside the bedroom curtains and watched as the black truck rattled down the dirt lane, trailing a cloud of dust. If she hurried, she could be at the station in time to catch the four o'clock train to Des Moines.

She pulled a battered plaid suitcase from under her bed. Inside, she'd already stuffed a few underclothes. She folded two dresses, a faded nightgown, and a warm sweater, and laid them on top. Then she tucked in the only items she'd brought with her to the farm three years before—a Bible and a small photograph, cracked and worn, of the mother she barely remembered. Kneeling, she pried the loose board between her bed and the wall, removed a coin purse, and slid it into her dress pocket.

With a firm hand, Ruth snapped the clasps of the suitcase and lifted it. She shut the bedroom door, stopping only to jam a straw hat over her mass of curls, and strode out of the house without a backward look.

Her long legs carried her quickly down the lane and into the cornfield. She walked between the rows, far enough into the field that no one could see her from the road. The sharp edges of the leaves scraped her arms, but she didn't slow her pace. She could not miss the train. The heat and humidity from the nearly six-foot-tall plants soon left her dripping with perspiration. She wished she had a wet rag to sponge off her face.

The field ended at the crossroad. She looked both ways before scurrying across the road and into the next field. A barbedwire fence protected it, so she set her suitcase down, pried apart the strands and stepped through, carefully lifting her skirts to prevent catching and tearing the fabric. At the opposite end of the field, she brushed the last of the cornstalk leaves aside. A flashy red-winged blackbird swished up from his cattail perch in the ditch, calling "*ka-chee, ka-chee.*" Ruth gasped and nearly dropped her suitcase. She watched the bird fly across the sharp blue sky. A yearning flooded her heart, and she gazed upward until she could no longer observe his flight.

Then she crawled between the strands of barbed wire and waded through towering weeds on the railroad embankment. After reaching the tracks, she picked off the burrs and seeds that stuck to her skirt. If she followed the tracks to the Grantsville depot, she could purchase a ticket. Her ticket to freedom.

Ruth tugged the straw hat farther down on her face and kept her eyes on the wooden railroad ties as she stepped from one to another, taking care not to trip. As she neared Grantsville, she could hear traffic. A sputtering *chug-chug* of a motorcar, the muffled *clop, clop* of a horse, and the rhythmic squeak of wagon wheels. She resisted the temptation to raise her head and look. If someone recognized her, the entire plan could fail.



She walked faster, and her heart kept pace with her feet as she neared the depot. No one stood on the platform. She let out the breath she had been holding, set her suitcase down, and took a moment to still her racing heart. Then, reaching into her pocket, she drew out the coin purse and clutched it to her chest as she stepped inside.

Mr. Van Gundy, a man she knew only by name, was behind the ticket window. He glanced up from his newspaper. "May I help you, ma'am?"

"I'd like one ticket to Des Moines," Ruth whispered.

Mr. Van Gundy frowned and stroked a bristly mustache, but he must have heard her because he asked, "Round-trip or one-way?"

"One-way." She answered firmly and nodded to confirm it.

Few people left Grantsville without plans to return as soon as possible. Those who lived here couldn't imagine making their home anywhere else. But not Ruth. She hadn't found a home here, she'd found a house of horrors. But Mr. Van Gundy didn't question her.

"That will be seventy-five cents."

Ruth carefully counted coins and slid them under the metal barrier across the window. He pushed the ticket back to her and muttered, "Thank you. The train will arrive," he pulled a round, gold watch from his pocket and looked at it, "in twenty minutes. You may have a seat in the waiting area. I'll announce the train's arrival." He gave a vague wave toward the wooden benches lining the station's perimeter and turned his attention back to his newspaper.

Ruth smiled. As if anyone in the small building would miss the arrival of the smoking, roaring dragon. She looked around for a sign.

"The ladies' room is down that hall." Mr. Van Gundy pointed without looking up.

“Thank you.” Ruth’s cheeks warmed, but she hurried in the direction he pointed. In the small room, she splashed water on her sweaty face and patted it dry with the towel provided, marveling at water running from a faucet inside the building. She tucked some loose curls back behind her ear. Then she looked at the straw hat in her hand. She would never again work in a field. She stuffed the hat deep into the trashcan, tossed back her freed tresses, and held her head high as she made her way through the depot to a bench.

Twenty minutes later, she heard the train whistle. It seemed to be calling her name. She stood, even before Mr. Van Gundy’s voice announced, “The train for Des Moines is now arriving. All passengers need to make their way to the platform for boarding. Please have your tickets ready.”

Ruth clutched her ticket in one hand, her suitcase in the other. She followed two men and a woman to the platform and watched as the train hissed and squealed to a stop. The conductor held the handle on the side of the train as he stepped onto the platform.

A rush of memories flooded over her. Coming from New York City, a fifteen-year-old orphan on the train. The night on the stage at the operahouse when the Schmidts chose her. The excitement of having a family in Grantsville, Iowa. She’d thought it was a dream come true, but the dream turned into a nightmare. She shook her head and stepped up to the train.

The conductor punched a hole in her ticket and handed it back. “Welcome, miss. Enjoy your train ride.”

Ruth made her way to a car with only a few people, all strangers. She lifted her suitcase to the overhead storage area and sat in an empty row by the window. Within a few minutes the whistle sounded again, and with a jerk, the car moved.

As the train pulled out of Grantsville, it picked up speed.

FLIGHT OF THE RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD

The wheels sang a sweet song to Ruth. *Free. Free. You're finally free.*