

A PASSAGE OF *Chance*

Linda Fulkerson

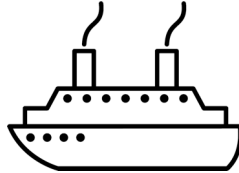


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Chapter One



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Raucous laughter echoed through the grand hallway. Melody Lampert sighed. She closed the cover of Mark Twain’s latest novel and rose from her comfortable cushion in the petit salon. “Boys,” she muttered with a slight head shake. Padding across the carpeted floor, she grasped the doorknob and gave it a slow twist to prevent waking those in the upper-floor bedchambers who might have managed to remain asleep despite the disturbance.

Another wave of guffawing boomed through the house, quickly followed by the incessant ringing of a bell. Melody gasped and hurried her steps, stopping for a brief moment to catch her breath near the smoking room’s intricately carved double doors. Her deep intake of air brought with it the suffocating stench of cigars. She stifled a cough and tugged one of the doors until it flung open. Smoke billowed from the chamber.

She rushed across the room and grabbed the bell from her cousin's hand. "Reginald Emerson, you'll wake the entire household."

"Twas my intent. How else shall a man fend off starvation?" Brandy laced his breath.

"Well, I certainly don't wish for you to wake Grandmother." A slight shudder rumbled through her. She met her cousin's eyes. Had he noticed? "Why didn't you use the bell pull?"

Andrew Newsome, their nearest neighbor and a close friend of Reginald, laughed. "He tried." The young man spat the words between guffaws. "But he yanked so hard, it broke, so he found that handbell and used it instead."

Reginald looked past Melody's shoulder. A bewildered look crossed his face. "Where is Enid?"

"In bed, I suppose. She retired two hours ago. It's nearly half-past ten." The grandfather clock opposite the room's hearth gonged, as if to confirm her statement.

She surveyed the room. A pile of plates topped with discarded bread crusts sat precariously beside a near-empty decanter. At least someone had attempted to tidy up. Returning her gaze to the table strewn with cards and coins, she noticed a new person in the quartet of gamblers.

A smattering of freckles dotted the newcomer's face. Melody noticed that the young man's ill-fitted jacket strained against thick biceps and exposed at least two inches of skin at the wrist.

Her scrutiny obviously unnerved him because he tugged at his too-tight collar.

"Where is Peter?" Although directed at no one in particular, she kept her focus on the new man, his green eyes having captured her attention.

"He fell ill," Andrew answered. "So, I brought Padric

Murphy as a last-minute replacement. He's the mechanic of my new yacht."

Mechanic? Her gaze fell to Padric's hands. Strong. Tanned. Not manicured. She couldn't recall ever seeing a workingman's hands. Not this close, anyway. Suddenly remembering her manners, she gave a quick curtsy and spoke. "Melody Lampert." She extended her hand, palm down. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Murphy."

Padric stood, grasped her hand, and gave it a hearty shake. "Same to you, Miss."

The remaining three men laughed at his faux pas.

"Mr. Murphy is an *Irishman*," said Reginald, contempt oozing off his last word.

A deep blush reddened Padric's face. "Excuse me," he muttered and crossed to the coat rack in two swift strides. "It's time for me to bid you all goodnight." He reached for his hat.

"But we need a fourth for the game," whined Edward Randolph, another neighbor of Melody and Reginald.

Andrew stood. "Yes, Padric. Please stay. The night's still young. I'm most certain Mr. Emerson meant nothing from his comment."

Padric's eyes cut toward Reginald then flickered back to Melody. "And I'm most certain he did." He bowed slightly, his focus never wavering from her face. "Goodnight, sirs, Miss."

She grasped the sleeve of his coat. "Mr. Murphy, please, do stay. I apologize for the lack of manners displayed by my cousin. I shall prepare more refreshments." She reached for the stack of dishes.

"Allow me." He shrugged out of his overcoat, flung it back on the hook, and scooped up the plates. "Where to?"

As his long strides followed her short, scurried steps, Melody felt the warmth of his breath on her neck. "Just this way, Mr. Murphy. The kitchen is through there." She held

open the door and gave a nod toward the sink. “You may set the dishes in there, please.”

She tiptoed to reach the cupboard containing the breadbox.

“Need some help?” Padric leaned past her, barely brushing his hand against hers as he easily retrieved a fresh loaf. “Is it normal for the mistress of the house to know her way around the kitchen?”

Melody sucked in a breath. How much should she tell this stranger? That there was nothing *normal* about this household? That she not only wasn’t the mistress, but barely ranked above the servants? That she was trapped in this house? In this life? With no hope of escape? She exhaled slowly. “My grandmother rented the house for the winter. We shall soon return to the Hamptons.” She busied herself with slicing the bread.

“Ah. That explains the accent. I didn’t think you were from this area.” He looked around the room and pointed toward the icebox. “Do you need something to go with the bread?”

She nodded. “Looks like I’m not the only one familiar with a kitchen.” A small giggle emerged from her throat. The sound startled her.

“No offense intended, but I didn’t grow up with the luxury of servants. Or even a mother. Father and I learned to fend for ourselves when it came to food.” He returned to the workspace with an array of meats and cheeses.

“No offense taken. I also didn’t grow up with servants.” She sighed. “Which is why I’m here now.”

He turned to face her and lifted an eyebrow.

“I ... um ...” Melody chided herself for bringing up a topic she couldn’t broach.

Padric held up a hand and shook his head. “I’m sure there’s a story there that I’d love to hear, but perhaps we’d best feed

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your cousin and his guests before they mutiny.” He grinned as he piled a generous portion of meat onto a slice of bread.

“I agree.” Relief washed over her. She savored the genuineness of his smile. How long had it been since she’d been in the company of someone who treated her without contempt?

As they finished the meal preparation, Melody’s lips remained silent, but not her mind. Questions swarmed through her brain. What had possessed her to loosen her tongue in the presence of this easygoing Irishman? And why had her body betrayed her with near swoons and shivers at his proximity?

She attempted to shush such silly thoughts. It wasn’t like he would or could provide her a means of escape. He was simply a man coerced to fill the fourth space at a poker table. Nothing more. Besides, her grandmother would never allow a man of his lowly standing to court Melody. In fact, her grandmother would never allow anyone to court her.

Ever.

About Linda Fulkerson



Linda Fulkerson began her writing career as a copyeditor and typesetter at a small-town weekly newspaper. She has since been published in several magazines and newspapers, including a two-year stint as a sports writer, and is the author of two novels and several non-fiction books. In 2020, she purchased Mantle Rock Publishing's backlist and founded Scrivenings Press LLC.

She and her husband, Don, live on a ten-acre plot in central Arkansas. They have four adult children and eight grandchildren. Linda enjoys photography, RV travel, and spoiling her two dachshunds.