

ISLAND *Mayhem*

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Off the coast of Savannah, Georgia

“Mayday Mayday! Goin ... down!”

The crackling radio tore Wilhelmina from her evening chores.

“Willie ca— ... -ear me?”

Wilhelmina turned the dial, desperately attempting to clear the signal. “This is Willie. Over.”

Nothing.

She needed to hear where Lou was. “I hear you, Lou. What are your coordinates? Over.”

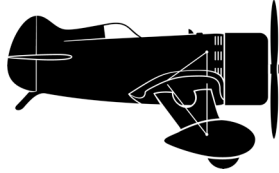
“—see land, turn ... back. Try to—”

“Lou?” Wilhelmina wrung her hands. This can’t be happening. They were just going to do a circle. Louise promised it would be routine, and she’d be home by supper.

“Find ...Willie! Yo ... fin ... us.”

Lord, where are they? She never mentioned where they were flying—just ‘over the ocean.’ They could be anywhere. Please Lord, protect them.

Chapter One



Three Days Earlier

Tuesday Morning, June 15

Louise Krause attempted to condense masses of fabric into the tiny carrying case yet again. Why was she even bothering with the parachute? She never used them. Throwing her hands up, she shoved the nuisance aside.

Wilhelmina had been rebuilding an engine but chose that moment to peer across their workshop, a gleam in her knowing eyes. This once-cramped airplane hangar was the perfect size for the small mechanic shop Wilhelmina now ran.

“Dorothy Lou—”

“Stop it. Y-you ... just ... don’t.”

“I’m sorry.” She set down her wrench. “Lou ...” Wilhelmina walked toward her, reaching out as if to console her. “I should never have—”

“No. You shouldn’t. It’s *her* name. Not mine.” Louise wiped an errant tear as she jerked her shoulder away, returning to the abandoned parachute. “Never mine,” she mumbled.

The long silence was deafening.

Wilhelmina squeezed Louise's shoulder and returned to the engine parts strewn across the workbench. "So, tell me. Why are you messing with that 'chute? Good news?"

Louise inhaled, regulating her breathing. She couldn't stay angry with Wilhelmina. And she did have good news. The best news.

"Your man Stanley secured a GeeBee." Louise hesitated. Did Willie know how big this was? "They want me to fly my playboy boss and his trusty sidekick before purchase." Here was the catch. "Over the Atlantic."

"Would you be comfortable doing that? I mean, how long has it been since you've taxied anyone? And have you even flown over water?"

"Of course, I have."

Wilhelmina's eyebrows shot up as she glared at Louise. Oh no—that look again. Louise might have been hasty when answering. No one needed to know she'd only flown over lakes and rivers—never the ocean. But she could do it. How hard could it be? Amelia Earhart flew to Hawaii just last month. Now she was making a trip around the world. Louise only needed to navigate the seas for a few miles, not the whole ocean. She could do this.

"Since we lost the biplane, I've only made maintenance flights for clients. No passengers. Not since before Atlanta." Louise tilted her head back in thought. "So, more than a year."

"Uh-huh. And you want your first passengers to be your boss and longtime crush?"

Louise remained silent, hoping Wilhelmina's concentration with the engine repair would quell her questions. She wasn't sure she wanted any passengers ever again. But this was the opportunity of a lifetime for any pilot—especially a female one.

The engines weren't enough of a distraction. Willie

glanced up. “Did you say a GeeBee? Aren’t those the cursed planes?”

“Don’t tell me you believe in curses.” Louise paused, remembering poor Florence’s fatal crash at the International Air Races. But designs had improved, and that was years ago. Louise would not share the same tragedy. “So, they’ve had a run of bad luck, but I wouldn’t say ... cursed.”

“Then why are you packing a ’chute? You never use those.” Wilhelmina grabbed a larger wrench and growled at the stubborn bolt.

“You said it yourself, I don’t fly as often anymore. As for ferrying the boss around, I’m certain they only hired me as their bookkeeper so I could be at their beck and call.” Louise threw the now neatly packed fabric on the floor. “Besides, *someone* scolds me every time I go without one.”

“Scold? *Me*? Never.” Wilhelmina grinned. “I merely remind you of the importance of staying safe and valuing life.”

“Thank you for your vote of confidence,” Louise placed the parachute in the cubby containing all her flight gear and glanced at the wall clock. Grabbing another unraveled mess, she headed back to her corner. She could repack at least one more parachute before work.

“I trust you, but maybe not the plane.” Willie wiped her greasy hands on a rag after the bolt finally broke loose. “I hate that you had to stop nursing school this semester, but I’m glad you get a chance to fly again.” Taking a deep breath, she attacked the next bolt. “So, just Eugene and Augustus?”

“Yeah. I wish Augustus would pester someone else. It’s bad enough to have the playboy boss man, I don’t need his guard dog too.” Louise finished the second ’chute much faster than the first. “Every time Augustus comes in with Eugene, I struggle to concentrate. His penetrating gaze and statue-like posture make me squirm.”

“I’m sure his muscular physique and dive-into-me blue eyes, have nothing to do with your distraction.” Wilhelmina wagged her eyebrows as she placed her tools back in their proper cubbies. “Enjoy your close quarters.” Willie let a giggle slip before asking, “When is the grand adventure?”

Heat crept up Louise’s neck. “Here, put this up too.” Louise tossed the tightly packed bag to Willie hoping her cheeks remained unflushed. “Oh, look at the time. I must go, or I’ll be late for my real job.” She grabbed her purse and ducked her head as she scurried across the hangar. “We fly Friday.”

“What do we want for supper?” Willie asked.

“Your choice. I’ll likely be late. The books are killing me this week.” She flung open the door and hesitated. “I know I’ve only been there a month, but it’s a wonder they stayed afloat all these years. Their records are a mess. I’m trying to reevaluate the last six months.” Louise crossed the threshold calling back, “Worst case, I’ll bring them home to you.”

“Miss ‘I can figure sums in my sleep’ wants my help? I feel honored,” Wilhelmina shouted after a retreating Louise.

LOUISE WALKED the four blocks to Astor Realty. Excitement about the upcoming flight bubbled inside her. She was going to fly again.

Even after ...

No. She smiled at each passerby, refusing to get her spirits down. As she approached the quaint office, she stooped to pet the neighborhood stray. Today would be a glorious day.

The doorbell chimed as she entered. Nodding to Stanley, she took her seat behind the oak desk. Good. No Augustus. Maybe she could get some work done without distraction. Even in school he was a distraction. She may have been four years his

junior, but she'd still noticed him. Who didn't notice him? He was the silent star of the football team. With his arm and skills, he could have gone to any college, but he remained here, keeping his best friend out of trouble.

Shaking away the memories of yesteryears, Louise focused on the records before her. The figures awaited. She pulled out expense ledgers for April, May, and June.

After eight hours, three more ledgers, and several cups of coffee, Louise was off over seven hundred dollars rather than the sixty-two that had concerned her last night.

Where was the money?

Yesterday she'd assumed the previous clerk just made errors here and there, but today ... After digging back as far as January, nothing added up. There was almost a rhythm to the missing sums, but she couldn't put her finger on it.

Could it be Eugene? He did buy a new Ford Coupe last month, and now this GeeBee ...

No. No way. But money was missing. A pattern indicated someone was taking it. Rigid, by-the-book Stanley couldn't be the culprit, so who else but Eugene? She wasn't wrong about the skewed records. This was deliberate.

What was that annoying echo? The numbers blurred.

"Miss Lou-ise?"

Startled out of her stupor, Louise glanced up to see Stanley hovering over her desk, coat in hand.

"There now. What seems to be bothering you?"

Should she bring up her suspicions? He was partner in the company, after all. Astor Realty might hold Eugene's name and claim him as the face, but Stanley was the brains behind all business decisions. They never could have survived the Depression, much less excelled, without Stanley's brilliance.

"Oh, hello, Stanley." Louise forced what she hoped was an innocent sounding giggle. "I didn't know you were still here."

“I’m off now, ma’am. That is, unless you need something.”

“No. Thank you.” Louise started to gather her belongings, hoping Stanley would leave without her. Yet, knowing he was a gentleman, she didn’t hold her breath. “I’m right behind you.”

She needed to take the documents home to Wilhelmina. Between the two of them, they could make sense of the mess.

Stanley hesitated, holding the door. His tight facial features resembled a toad’s. What did Willie see in him?

It was no use. Giving up all pretense, she sat back down. “Stanley, something is wrong.”

How to put her assumptions into words? “The books ... I fear I’ve missed something.”

Stanley returned to her desk, setting down his briefcase. “Let me see.”

“Here.” Louise punctuated the statement by placing her finger where the errors began.

Several minutes passed before Stanley glanced up. “This is January’s ledger, silly girl. Is Friday’s flight already getting to you? The month is June.”

With a hard swallow, Louise replied, “Yes, sir. I know. I just ... well ... it seems ... I had to go back that far to find the start. I will soon have this figured out.” Her final words spilled out like a waterfall. She needed this job. Louise didn’t give up her dreams of nursing only to fail her first month as a bookkeeper.

“You’ve spent all day on this, have you not? Put these figures on my desk. I’ll see to it later this week.” Stanley reached for his case. “Goodness knows it will take far more than a glance to untangle this mess.”

A truer statement could not be uttered.

“Sir, I apologize. I assure you I am good with numbers. Please. Give me some more time, and I will fix this.” Once he started digging, would he, like her, assume the worst of Eugene? Would they fire her?

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Stanley attempted a supportive smile but his gaunt features and crooked nose failed to convey empathy. “Don’t fret, my dear. We will see that all is right.” He scooped up the papers, transferring them from her desk to the top drawer of his. “You just concentrate on Friday. I wouldn’t want something to happen to my partner or our newest employee.”

WILHELMINA PEERED at the darkening sky. Louise should have been home already. No need to have a cold supper. She placed the savory dish back in the warming box. Lou mentioned the books before leaving this morning. Could those numbers really be bothering her? She should be stressing over how to tend to patients and learning the way of a nurse—not holed up in an office with two men all day.

Wilhelmina fiddled with the flower arrangement on the table. This bouquet was one of her favorites, with little yellow buttercups contrasting the blue-violet asters. She prayed as she waited.

Thank you, Lord, for sharing your beauty and creation with me. Help me to see Your handiwork daily. Lord, I don't want to sound like a broken record, but give us means to send Lou back to nursing school in the fall. She belongs there, Lord. Tending to the sick, pouring her passion into something with meaning, not risking life and limb soaring through the heavens.

Wilhelmina squeezed her eyes tighter, One day they would catch a break. Who knew—maybe she could attend school too.

The door slammed, and Lou materialized. Nothing like perfect timing.

Your will not mine, Lord. In Your Son's name I pray. Amen.

Finishing her prayer, she grabbed her oven mitts and placed the potato casserole on the table.

“That smells divine. Sorry I’m late,” Lou flung off her heels.

Wilhelmina smiled to herself. Lou tried so hard to fit in as a society woman, but it was obvious she preferred dungarees and men’s boots. “No bother, ’tis still warm. How was work?”

“Frustrating.”

“So, I get to go cross-eyed reviewing numbers?”
Wilhelmina laughed, trying to ease Lou’s tension.

“No. Stanley took them. The longer I reviewed the books, the more errors I found. They’re missing nearly seven hundred dollars. He questioned me, so I guess my confusion showed.” Louise ran her hands through her short wavy locks, making the already frizzy hair stand on end. Now she matched her hero—Albert Einstein—in not only brains, but looks. “How could I miss the discrepancy my first few weeks? Have I been that distracted lately?”

Wilhelmina patted her hand. “I’m sure all is well.”

“I fear it’s not.” Louise scooped a heaping spoonful of casserole onto her plate. “Eugene is skimming. I didn’t have the heart to tell Stanley tonight, but I’m sure he will notice soon enough. No way that much money disappears innocently.”

“Eugene? But why? He has plenty of money. Besides, it’s his company.”

“Astor may be Eugene’s family, and the public recognizes his pretty-boy face, but you and I both know who built the wealth. Stanley wouldn’t allow Eugene to take more than his share.”

“Oh, Lou, don’t be so hard on them. Both are good men.” Wilhelmina took a dainty bite before finishing her thought. “Trust that all is well, and it was just a misunderstanding. Who knows, maybe they forgot to give you a receipt along the way?”

“*Trust. It will be fine.* Let me guess—now you’re going to tell me to pray about it too.” Louise slammed down her fork and stood. “Willie, you don’t get it. The world is full of bad people.

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You can't just wish them good." Louise scrapped her nearly full plate back into the dish before stomping over to the sink.

At least she saved the food this time. They couldn't afford to trash any of it.

"I do believe prayer will help." Wilhelmina sighed. *What could she say to help Lou get over her anger and distrust of everyone?* Losing Papa Krause had pushed her farther from God than ever before. It was a wonder Lou trusted her. "Pray for both men. If there is embezzlement involved, it will be a difficult road to travel for all of you."

About Elena Hill



Elena Hill is a Christian, a wife, a dog Mom, and an optometrist. She dabbles with many hobbies including photography, painting, and most recently, writing. She has been an avid reader and supporter of Christian fiction since a young age, but in 2020 took on the title of content editor for Scrivenings Press.

Elena currently resides in northeast Arkansas, along with her husband James and fur baby Idgie. Her favorite pastime is riding around with family in their side-by-side, chasing the sunset. Many of her photos display God's handiwork—varying skylscapes and colors.