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Hannah Couzens

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Foreword

**This book is themed by the proverb of a cat supposedly
having nine lives.**

**As the reader, you may think that the series of events occurring
in this book border on the fantastical; sadly all the unfolding
chapters are in fact true.**

**Nothing written in this book has happened due to deliberate
misadventure, only the driving force of self-survival which
has occasionally led me into deadly situations.**

More often than not, it was a case of wrong time, wrong place.

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friend Joyce for her encouraging words; to Carl; to Dr
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Zdenko

Town: Maribor

Date of Birth: 1948

Year: 1962

That Lottery Ticket

A terribly loud noise woke me. It came from the first floor window of my room. There were at least ten of my forty racing pigeons, flapping and fighting on the ledge. Amongst them was a white one which was the first I had bought a year earlier with my pocket money. When he saw me, he flew away to a branch on the huge cherry tree that stood next to our house and then he returned. I sensed that he was trying to tell me something. Although his mate was beside him, he seemed bothered.

As he flew off again, I heard my father shouting in the next room: "Where is Olga?" Olga was my younger sister by two years.

I had never heard my father shout before. My mother replied loudly saying: "You just try! You just try!" I didn't have a clue what this was all about.

Then I heard the familiar sound of an automatic pistol being cocked. My mother screamed and shouted to me and my older brother Thomas, telling us to get out of the house as my father was going to kill us all.

I listened in total shock. All sorts of things were racing through my mind. Kill us all?

Why? For what reason? I knew that, as an officer in the Territorial Army, my father kept his armoury at home and always had his pistol at the ready. A year earlier Thomas had told me that he had found the pistol in my father's suitcase in my parents' room, and that

he had fired it in the woods nearby with his friends. Thomas, two years my senior and in charge, forbade me to play with it on my own. Of course, I did not listen to him and on a few occasions I did. The familiar sound of the click in the next room told me everything.

My pet pigeon, whom I had named Bixie, *had* been trying to tell me something. Within seconds of this realisation, I jumped onto the window ledge and from there onto the branch of the cherry tree where Bixie was perching. Although I was about twenty-five feet up, it took seconds to climb down to the ground. My mother was rearing chickens at the time, so I ran through their shed and climbed over the neighbour's fence to get as far away from home as possible.

By then, all the neighbours whose gardens bordered ours were looking out of their windows to see what was going on. The neighbour whose garden I found myself in was very insistent about calling the police which I did not want. All I was concerned about was my mother, Thomas and Olga's safety. I ran about half a mile to my aunty Hanika, who, when she saw me, crossed herself and thanked God for saving me. As she took me into her arms she said: "I knew something was going to happen".

My aunty had wanted to adopt me for years but my mother had said that because I was the most intelligent of her children, in no way would she let me go and live there, although she agreed that I could visit my aunty as much as possible. Aunty Hanika wasn't able to conceive due to diabetes and other ailments. She was well spoken and well read, and she never talked badly of my mother but she was concerned that my father trying to shoot us would have a psychological effect on me. Which it did.

After that shocking day, I did stay with my aunty and I did not go to school for two weeks. Mother kept coming to my aunt's house crying and begging for me to come home. After two days, she turned up with a package under her arm. All she said was that I must throw this heavily wrapped parcel in the river which was a few hundred yards away.

I took the package and headed for the river. I was certain that my mother had taken the pistol and wanted to get rid of it. Making sure I was not seen, I tied a few stones to the parcel so that it would sink to the lowest point of the deep and fast flowing river.

After half an hour I returned to my aunt's house. My mother was still there. Crying, I asked what had led to this near tragedy. Slowly and emotionally, she explained.

Apparently, three months previously, my father had gone to a show. There was a lottery at the end of the event. My father had taken chemicals used in his hobby as a photographer in order to change his raffle number to the winning one. The first prize was a motorcycle and just as the allotted ten minutes to present the ticket were up, and before the organisers could pick a replacement, my father stepped forward with his doctored one.

However, as he was about to wheel his prize away, the holder of the genuine ticket turned up, and to make matters worse, he was a policeman. It all went to court and my father was facing two years imprisonment. Because he was facing a custodial sentence and the loss of a key position in the textile industry where everybody knew him, he had seemingly 'lost the plot'.

The craziest thing about it was that he did not need to steal the motorcycle as with his wages he could afford to buy a new car every two years.

Within days of this event, my mother was called in to my school by the head to discuss my future education regarding my erratic attendance. I sat with my mother and we were informed of my only option. To my surprise and my mother's pride, it appeared I was going to be promoted instead of punished by being offered a tutorial position to my fellow pupils. This meant I would not have to face my father too often, and that I could compress two hourly lessons into one, bunk off to town and lose myself in the crowds in order to stay away from home. My plans were made.

I was given three classmates who were doing badly in four subjects: German, English, Mathematics and Physics. The classmate most urgently in need of improving his maths was a very quiet, tall, strong young man of my age by the name of Tony. He and his whole family had been forcibly resettled from another part of Slovenia, still a part of former Yugoslavia.

Under Tito's communist regime, in order to prevent any uprising amongst the population and due to extreme political and economic conditions immediately after the Second World War, many farm owners who had had strong connections with the Germans during the war or had very close German ancestry were automatically resettled and in many cases had their farms nationalised. Almost all of the farmers who had collaborated with the German army during the occupation were simply shot along with their families.

Tony was moved from the Adriatic part of Slovenia to our northern region. His family was given a farm with a lot of land and

livestock. In return for this quota, seventy percent of their complete produce such as wheat, pork, beef, milk, corn, etc. was collected by the state, the tax being paid separately.

When I was introduced to Tony's father by the school head, it was apparent his parents were not happy with his extra lessons. They were actually very sad that their son was simply not coping with his studies. Financially, they had become far better off than most of the people around the village. I was to start my task the very next day.

When I came to their door, Tony's mother called me into a separate room and asked me how bad his marks were. I could not tell her since the results were kept locked in the head master's office. I gave her an indication that he was about to be dropped into a lower class, meaning he would have to repeat the class and be a whole year behind.

By coincidence, she had also met my mother and father and knew that I spent a lot of time at my aunt's house. I assumed that in a very small community people talk to each other. At the end of our conversation she stated that she felt sorry for me. Like most other people, she did not know the reason for my circumstances.

As we went into the dining room, Tony already had his books and writing pad in front of him which were spread over the big dining table. His mum asked me if she could sit with us for a while, although she didn't understand most of the material. I began to ask Tony a few questions about certain points in the study books and realised we would have to start at the beginning. After about an hour, his mother

looked at me with despair in her eyes. On that first day, we spent about three hours analysing where his problems were.

When his mother saw me out she gave me a carrier bag and whispered: “Because you look cold and hungry”. I didn’t know what to say. Here was a woman I had never met before giving me a woollen jumper (the thickest I had ever worn), a lump of cheese wrapped in Christmas paper, along with a big chunk of ham. She said: “Thank you, Zdenko, I know that Tony will make it with your help”. She begged me not to abandon him as they had great admiration for my knowledge.

And so I went to Tony’s farm twice a week in the afternoon. He did everything that I asked him to do. I also had two more pupils who needed a lot of patience. Back at school, I had regained my confidence, and the teachers were thrilled with the progress of my three pupils. I regained the respect and friendliness of everybody.

I had some bright moments at this young age as well. My father bought an accordion for my brother whom he doted on although he couldn’t play and had no musical ear whatsoever. My mother insisted that I should be allowed to learn as well. I progressed very quickly and learned a lot of music. My father was disappointed that my brother only looked and listened at me playing that huge accordion. I couldn’t even see the keyboard properly but I became better and better.

Over the long weekends, my mother always took me to our granny’s about ten miles away. My mother came from a big family. She had eleven siblings in total and they would all come together at my granny’s so, to my mother’s delight, I would entertain them with

my musical talent. (Musical talent can't be taught or learned: it is something we are born with so no bragging here.)

Being from a Christian family, the custom was that a male guest should visit other's homes and wish them a Happy New Year. In a parallel class at my school were two older boys who invited me to join their duo. One played the trumpet and the other was a guitarist. They normally played on people's doorsteps in the early hours of New Year's Day. I was told that we would earn quite good money.

We got together and practiced a lot. It sounded okay so we assembled at about 11pm on New Year's Eve. It was bitterly cold. The snow was around three feet high. Danny the guitarist warned me that the guitar would go out of tune rapidly and so would my accordion so we should get inside as soon as people opened their door. Alan the trumpeter showed us the house of a factory director and dead on midnight we started to play.

We were ushered into the house still playing a popular piece. The house was full of local dignitaries, most of them well intoxicated. One of the women grabbed Alan and began to pull him towards the next room. Another lady started to embrace me and pressed the keys on my accordion. Danny looked at me but we knew that we should stick to our plan and not fall for this pleasant distraction. I observed that the husband of the lady trying to kiss me was getting very embarrassed and that the situation could quickly get out of control. We had a few drinks and were showered with a lot of bank notes which we stuffed into our pockets. We then left, visiting another four houses and ended up with a lot of money! As well as being a musician, I also wanted to learn how to swim and was persistently trailing the older two neighbours who were swimming across the aforementioned

fast-flowing river. They agreed to teach me how to swim and the day after this, we went to the river. As we approached the bank, which was high above the river flow, they simply threw me into the strong current! I went under the water like a stone.

I thought that I was as good as dead. My neighbour Stana, who was four years older than me, grabbed me by the leg and pulled me to the surface. I must have swallowed a lot of water and while I was coughing he held me in the air above his head. He then asked me if I was frightened, to which I replied: “Not anymore!”

The first swimming lesson was over and the next day I just followed Stana to the river again and we continued where we had left off the day before. Within two weeks I could swim alone across that deep turbulent choppy river. But in the meantime, a tragedy unconnected to the river was lurking, waiting just around the corner.