

Chapter 1 - Hilene

Lorilee Dawn, owner of Dawn's Early Light, dusted the crystal glassware sitting on the top shelf. She moved a couple of vases toward the aisle to display their etched designs for any passing customer to admire. As she turned to step behind her sales counter, a short older man, wearing a red pointed cap and large brown shoes, stared at her.

"Hobnobby, you scared me," she said, placing her hand on her chest "I didn't hear you come in."

"Sorry," he replied, stroking his long white beard.

He placed his stubby fingers over the edge of the counter.

Lorilee leaned toward him. "I hardly ever see you, but I've heard of your exploits from Susan," she said, inserting the feather duster under her cash drawer. "She's supposed to come in tomorrow. Is she okay?"

"Yes. Deception is an ugly endeavor," he stated, looking into her eyes.

She stared at the gnome and leaned closer. "Yes, it is. I hate being lied to. Why would you say that?"

He stepped away. "Be true to your heart, Lorilee," he added as he faded before her eyes.

"Well, that was odd," she murmured, blinking her eyelids. She heard he was a trickster but disappearing like that hadn't happened to her before.

Jean, her helper, approached the sales desk.

"Did you say something?" she asked.

"Uh, no," Lorilee said, looking away. "Let's unwrap some of those figurines we received yesterday."

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In a larger town up north, a young woman, Hilene Aspen, worked in one of the city's banks. Since her childhood, she

discovered she could connect with people and empathize with them and their troubles. This wasn't unusual today.

An elderly man walked into the bank and sat in the chair by her desk.

"Good morning, Mr. Williams," she said. "How can I help you today?"

She set aside the title papers she was working on and folded her hands on top of the desk. Her welcoming smile and youthful demeanor always put the gentlemen at ease.

"I need to safeguard my funds from, uh..."

Hilene reached toward him and touched his hand resting on her desk. Flashes of an angry woman shouting flooded Hilene's mind until she removed her fingers from the top of the man's hand.

"I know exactly what you need to do," she said. "You could open a safety deposit box for \$120 a year or open an interest-bearing mutual fund. The interest can be removed and donated to a charity or a school, relieving you of a tax burden."

"Does anyone in my will have to know?" He asked, shaking his hand.

"No, no one as long as they aren't told," she replied, smiling.

The man nodded. "Then, I'll do the fund."

She opened her drawer and retrieved a sheet of paper.

"Just fill this form out and your savings can be transferred into the fund." With one hand, she slid the form and a pen imprinted with the bank's name toward him.

"Not the savings," he said. "I have cash in my pocket."

Thinking the old man had a few hundred dollars to deposit, she watched as he reached behind his jacket lapel and withdrew two three-inch stacks of bills. With his hand still over the money, he looked at her.

"Will this be all right?" He whispered.

"Oh, yes, but I'll need a witness to count it. Would our bank manager suffice?"

"Mmm, yes. Some place private?"

Hilene rose from her chair and leaned toward him. "I'll return in a moment."

Mr. Williams nodded and slipped the money into his jacket pocket. Hilene returned to her desk, retrieved the form, but remained standing near her chair.

"Please come with me," she said, gesturing to him.

Mr. Williams stood and followed the young woman into the bank manager's office.

As he sat in one of the upholstered chairs, Hilene closed the office door behind him. She eased into the remaining chair by the manager's desk.

The manager leaned forward and clasped his hands on his desk.

"My understanding is you wish to deposit cash into one of our mutual funds," Mr. Hubbard said.

"Yes, sir," Mr. Williams replied.

"Then, I have to ask if the funds were gained legally."

"Yes, I've been saving this for years, but I was afraid it would be found."

The bank manager didn't want to pursue this any longer and looked at Hilene.

"Miss Aspen, the form please and we'll count the money ourselves."

The older man nodded and withdrew his cash from his jacket pocket.

She presented the sheet of paper to Mr. Williams.

"When we have finished, you'll sign this witness form."

They spent almost a half hour counting and recounting to make sure their totals agreed. After they were satisfied they both counted \$30,000, Hilene wrapped the bills together and handed the stack to her manager. He then proceeded to insert the bills into a Manila envelope.

"Please, sign here, here, and initial down here," she said, pointing at the various locations on the form.

Mr. Williams signed the appropriate lines. Mr. Hubbard initialed the label on the pouch holding the cash and handed it first to Mr. Williams to initial.

"Initial here," he said. "And pass this to Miss Aspen."

After Mr. Williams wrote his initials, he passed the envelope to Hilene who did the same and pulled the paper strip off the flap to seal it tight. She placed the signed form and then the packet cover on the copier behind Mr. Hubbard's chair.

"Mr. Williams, here are your copies," she said, handing their patron the sheaves of paper.

"Well," Mr. Hubbard said rising from his chair. "You are all set. If you have more funds to add, please let us know."

"Thank you. Both of you."

Mr. Williams folded his copies in half and stuck them into the inside of his jacket. He hesitated at first when lifting himself from the chair. Once he stood, he smiled and left the office.

Hilene turned and approached the manager.

"Sir? May I ask you something?"

"Yes, what is it, Miss Aspen?" he asked, looking at her.

"I have done well for this bank, haven't I?"

"Yes, we are fortunate to have your expertise. How long have you been with us?" he asked. "I know you have been here for some time."

"It's been nine years, sir."

"Well, what can I do for you?"

"I was thinking I could qualify for a raise."

Mr. Hubbard's smile faded from his lips. He shuffled the signed papers and gazed at her.

"Miss Aspen, you know funds are tight right now. You realize we are short-staffed, and even with your help on the mutual funds, this bank cannot offer any increases at this time. You understand, don't you?"

She pressed her mouth tight to prevent her from saying something she'd regret. Hilene bit her upper lip and inhaled a deep breath.

"Yes, I understand."

"Is that all?"

"Yes." Hilene nodded and turned to leave the office. She marched toward her desk near the tellers.

"After all the work I do, this is the thanks I get," she said to herself. *"With Danny out of work, I need the money."*

Behind her, Mr. Hubbard said her name.

"Miss Aspen, there is one more thing. Would you come here, please?" he said, standing by his office door.

"Yes?" she asked, turning toward him.

"I want you to join me at a banker's conference. It starts at five-thirty. Can you stay? I'd welcome your input and you'll be compensated for your time."

"Yes, I can stay," she replied, sighing. *"Maybe after this meeting, he would change her mind about her salary,"* she thought.

"Good, see you then," he said and returned to his office.

At five-thirty, she and two other employees entered the conference room. Several other banking officials arrived and sat in the chairs surrounding a large oval wooden table.

Mr. Hubbard showed her to a chair next to him. As soon as everyone filled the chairs, Mr. Hubbard waved to his secretary. She closed the door to the room. He rose from his chair to address everyone.

"Now, I want to start by what you are about to hear must be kept within these walls. You can't tell anyone. Are we clear?"

Many nodded or affirmed by saying, 'Yes.'

Mr. Hubbard glanced at the faces anticipating his next statement. He nodded to Hilene.

"This employee is my best seller of our mutual funds. Hilene Aspen, will you greet those around the table?"

Hilene rose from her chair and placed her hand either on a person's shoulder or shook their hand. She was exhausted when returning to Mr. Hubbard.

"We can trust everyone," she whispered to the bank manager.

After she sat, Mr. Hubbard opened a folded sheet of paper.

"This is a letter from the Federal Banking System," he announced. "Once every six months, a bank is chosen as a central receiver for funds distribution. One week from next Friday, the bank in Firth will take on that service."

When a few employees grumbled among themselves, Mr. Hubbard raised his hand.

"I have here the official letter. I'll pass this around for all of you to read. Please understand why we must not speak about this to anyone. One man raised his hand.

"Yes, Thomas?"

"Why Firth? Why not a more secure bank here in town or Boise?"

"Good question, but I'm guessing the anonymity of small banks are never suspected to have this volume of cash on their premises. Now, Thomas, Clark, I want you two to oversee the transition into the Bank of Firth."

"Yes, Sir," they both echoed.

"Good. You may all leave now," Mr. Hubbard said, lowering himself into his cushioned chair.

Chairs scraped the floor as everyone followed Clark from the room.

"Was my meet and greet the only reason I am here?" Hilene asked herself.

As she rose from her chair, Mr. Hubbard asked, "Miss Aspen, could you stay a moment longer?"

She turned, thinking he changed his mind about a raise.

"Yes, Mr. Hubbard," she said.

"I, uh, looked over your time with us and you are due to use some of your vacation time," he said. "Could you take the next two weeks off?"

"I—I didn't know I had to," she replied, unsure why this subject wasn't brought up earlier.

"Think it over. I wouldn't want you to lose it before the time expires."

"I see. I'll let you know in the morning. Would that be all right?"

"Yes, yes," he replied. "Have a good evening."

Hilene opened the door to their rental home. She threw her coat and purse on the wooden kitchen chair and set the car keys on the table. Fatigue overwhelmed her as the discouraging scene from her boss played over in her mind. She stepped into the small living room unaware her boyfriend sat on the sofa. She slumped into the worn upholstered armchair. She glanced across the room when she heard Danny's voice.

"Hey, Babe, you look beat," he said, playing a solitaire game on the worn coffee table.

"Oh, Danny, I didn't see you there," she said, sitting straight in the chair.

He tilted his head and looked toward her. "Something's wrong, isn't it? They didn't fire you, did they?"

"No. I wanted a raise, but the manager said 'No.'"

"Aw, come over here and tell me about it," he said, patting the cushion next to him.

Hilene inhaled a deep breath and forced herself to stand. She approached Danny around the low table and eased onto the cushion next to him. He wasn't a tall man but she admired his dark wavy hair.

As he placed an arm around her shoulders, he said, "Now, tell ol' Danny what's going on."

"After Mr. Hubbard told me I could not have a raise, he invited me to sit in on a special meeting with other important bank

officials. I felt like a receptionist without a notepad. After nine years of my life with the bank, you'd think—"

"What was the meeting about that you had to be there?" he interjected.

"Mr. Hubbard has seen my work with our customers and I think he knows how well I can read people. The why, I'm not supposed to tell."

"I see. Let's play our guessing game," Danny said. "If I'm right, you don't say anything."

Sometimes this was a game they played in their past to escape unwanted situations.

"I'm tired," she said, yawning. "Maybe I should lie down for a while."

"This won't take long." He smiled toward her. This was the smile that she loved so much.

"All right."

"Does this have to do with the bank you work in?" he asked. "After all, bank meetings are usually about banking stuff."

"No."

"So, it's about another bank?"

She remained quiet.

"In this town?"

"No."

"Out of town?"

She didn't reply but pressed her lips closed. She leaned forward and played one of his solitaire cards.

"Okay, we have Shelley, Rexburg, how about Blackfoot?"

"No."

"Uh, American Falls, Pocatello, Arco, Firth?"

Hilene played another card.

He listed each of the last four towns again, spacing the names apart. When he named the fourth one, she pressed her lips together and blinked her eyes.

"Firth? The bank in Firth?"

She said nothing and smiled.

Danny rubbed his hands together. "Now, what comes into a bank? Money? Babe, will the money come into the Firth bank?"

Hilene looked at him and turned over a card from the stack.

"How much, Babe?" he asked as she rose from the sofa.

"Sorry, Hon, but I need to grab forty winks," she replied. "I'm bushed."

"Do you mean forty-thousand?"

"No," she said. "After my nap, I'll feel like a million."

Danny jumped to face her.

"You—you mean forty million dollars?"

"I'm really tired," she said.

Danny's eyes widened as he placed his hands on his curly black hair.

"Oh, my God!" he yelled and pressed his lips against hers.

His kiss left Hilene's legs unsteady until a cold sensation crept through her spine. When he let her go, he returned his hands to his head and encircled the small room.

"I can't believe this," he kept chanting. "Do you know when?"

He brought his open hands in front of him.

"The high school baseball game is this Friday after next," she said, still playing the guessing game. "Maybe we should go shopping instead."

"Don't worry, Babe, I'm thinking of a plan."

"A plan?" she said, following him into the kitchen.

"Yeah," he said. "If this works out, you won't need to work at your bank."

"But I like my job," she protested.

"Babe, you'll get to do anything you want," he said, scooping the car keys into his hand. "First, I have to check things out."

He stepped closer and wrapped his arms around her. All of a sudden, she pushed him away.

"What's wrong, Babe? Did we get a carpet spark?"

"No. I saw you hurt. Oh, please be careful, Danny."

“Don’t worry. I’ll be okay,” he reassured her. “See you later.”

As Danny disappeared behind the kitchen door, Hilene sat in the wooden chair, recalling the vision she had of Danny lying in a pool of blood.

Hilene entered the bedroom and decided to take a shower. When she finished, she wrapped a towel around her head. She donned a terry cloth bathrobe and sat at her wooden vanity to apply her makeup. Thoughts of Danny suffering an injury bothered her. She tried to concentrate on how to convince her boss to give her a raise. Danny spent her earnings faster than she could earn it.

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