

6

Historical

GRACE AMONG GANGSTERS

by Leslea Wahl

Present Day

Luke follows his two younger siblings as they march down the hall to Grandma's condo. When their mom mentioned to them over breakfast that it would be nice for them to swing by Grandma's some time that day, all three teens had collectively groaned. Not that they don't enjoy spending time with their grandmother . . . but middle-of-the-week visits are difficult.

As they near the door, Luke tries to improve his attitude. But with a looming college decision hovering over him like an impending dark cloud of doom, he's in no mood for lighthearted chit-chat. However, the three siblings had made a pact—sports practices, club meetings, homework, and contemplating major life decisions all took a backseat to Grandma.

Austin raps on her front door, tapping out a rhythm with his knuckles like he's four instead of fourteen.

"Happy St. Patrick's Day!" he hollers as soon as Grandma opens the door.

She's wearing one of her many sweatsuits. Today's choice is festive green.

"Thank you for making the time to come by!" Her youngest grandson towers over her, but she draws him in for a hug anyway.

Celia holds up the floral arrangement they'd grabbed at the grocery store—an explosion of green carnations, white roses, delicate baby's breath, and greenery. The bouquet is spiked with festive jeweled shamrocks that catch the light as they bend and sway with every movement. "Of course. We know how much you love holidays."

"These are beautiful!" Grandma accepts the flowers and closes her eyes as she breathes in their scent. She then links her free arm through Celia's, and the two of them precede Luke and Austin into the condo. "How's the driving going?"

Luke's sister tucks a long strand of brown hair behind her ear. "Great! I should be ready to get my license in a few weeks."

"Wonderful." Grandma glances at Luke. "And have you made a decision about college?"

"Not yet." Luke turns to shut the door. The perfect excuse to hide his annoyance. The extra pressure from everyone isn't making the decision any easier. He turns back and claps his hands. Time to fake some enthusiasm.

“So, who’s ready to bake?”

“Let’s get to it!” Grandma leads the way to the kitchen. While she places the flowers in a vase, the siblings wash their hands then perch on stools around the kitchen island, the requisite baking sheet and rolling pin in front of each of them.

Grandma opens the refrigerator to pull out a bowl of cookie dough. “I really am glad you’re here. I know you’re all incredibly busy, so I wasn’t sure you’d have the time.”

“Absolutely. We couldn’t break tradition.” Austin dips a sneaky finger into the bowl to steal a little dough. He pops the small bit into his mouth before Grandma can bat his hand away.

Ever since Luke can remember, Grandma has celebrated holidays with them by making and decorating sugar cookies, whether it be Thanksgiving, Christmas, Valentine’s Day, St. Patrick’s Day, Easter, or the Fourth of July. Her supply of holiday cookie cutters probably puts most bakeries to shame.

He takes in Grandma’s wide smile, suddenly glad they’d agreed to come. He felt a little guilty that they’d stopped helping bake the cookies for a few years, using their busy schedules as an excuse. But after their recent summer vacation to the Southwest with Grandma and their parents, the siblings decided they should restart the tradition. The catalyst to change their minds: Grandma won’t be around forever.

Luke grabs a hunk of dough to start rolling out. “Dad said St. Patrick’s Day is your favorite holiday. Is that

true?" Seems like an odd favorite.

Grandma reaches for the shamrock-shaped cookie cutter. "Well, it's certainly near the top."

"You're part Irish, right?" Celia shifts through the pile of metal shapes.

"Yes, my father's family all came from Ireland generations ago." Grandma runs her index finger along the smooth clover shape in her hand. "But that's not really why the holiday means so much to me."

Luke sets down his rolling pin. Something in Grandma's voice makes him look up. Celia and Austin must also hear the slight tease in her tone because they stop what they're doing and glance at each other.

That sly grin of hers—the one they all first noticed over the summer—clued him in. "Something you want to tell us, Grandma?"

"Story time!" The teens say in unison, a bit louder than desired for inside voices.

Grandma laughs. "Well, there is a story I've never told you . . . something that happened to me when I was eleven and my brother Harry was thirteen. Every St. Patrick's Day, I'm reminded of that experience." She picks up her rolling pin and begins flattening a ball of dough. "As you know, my father was a professor of archeology at a college in Iowa. It was in 1957. Our father's break between terms fell in the middle of March. My mother was away taking care of her parents while Harry and I stayed home with our father. His plan for the week was to finally tackle a few projects around the house while we were at school."

Grandma draws a deep breath. A smile lifts the corners of her lips as she launches into her St. Patrick's Day tale.

1957

Having Daddy in charge is a little odd. In the afternoons when Harry and I normally complete our schoolwork, he's usually still at the university or cooped up in his den working on lesson plans or grading papers. Mama typically makes us a snack while we tell her about our day. But with her gone for the week and Daddy banging away down the hall installing some shelves in the closet, we're forced to fend for ourselves. Before settling down to start our work, I find two apples in the refrigerator and offer one to Harry, but he apparently prefers eating peanut butter right out of the jar. If only Mama could see that!

Since he's off work this week, I suppose I could insist that Daddy make us a proper snack and sit with us. But he seems to like finding out about our day over supper—a meal he pulls out of the freezer and warms up in the oven. I guess Mama thought we might starve to death if we had to rely on Daddy remembering to cook. Last week when she was preparing all those extra meals, I thought she was being a little overzealous, but seeing how our snack time is going—looks like she was right. There's not enough peanut butter in the cupboard to feed us for a whole week.

Without our usual routine, or maybe because of Daddy's constant banging, I can't seem to focus. How are

we to do our schoolwork with all that racket? Harry hunches over his math book, his loose-leaf paper spread across the kitchen table, as if not affected at all by the noise. How does he do that? He's always so calm, cool, and collected. While I'm . . . well, not.

Reluctantly, I pull my spelling word list from my school bag. Mama usually helps quiz me on the words, making a fun game out of it. How will I pass my spelling test without her? I'm sure neither Daddy nor Harry will help the way Mama does. What a disaster. Things just don't run smoothly without her here.

I open my notebook and write the first word on the list in my best cursive. Maybe I can at least get extra marks for my penmanship. I've just started to write a sentence using the word when the telephone on the wall rings.

The incessant pounding stops. Daddy's footsteps pad down the hallway to the front room.

"Hello, Turner residence. Mac speaking."

I wait. Maybe it's Mama calling to ask about our day.

"Oh, hi, Joe. Good to hear from you."

Not Mama. I focus on my sentence again.

"No kidding? Well, welcome to the Midwest."

Somehow, I mess up my capital L. My loops never look pretty enough. I turn my pencil upside down and start erasing the letter.

"Kansas City? It's a few hours from here."

I brush away the bits of eraser and try again.

"No. I'd love to see you, but I can't get away."

The loops of my second try are slightly better. How

does Mrs. Hamilton make the letters so perfect?

“My wife’s away taking care of her parents, so I’ve got the kids this week.”

I lean sideways, trying to get a glimpse of Daddy in the living room.

“No, not so little anymore. Harry is thirteen, and Gracie just turned eleven.”

Who is this Joe person?

“No. I couldn’t. They’re in school this week.”

I kick Harry’s leg with my saddle shoe, return his glare, and nod toward the living room. Daddy’s talking about us; the least we can do is listen.

“I mean, I guess they could miss a week of school, but why? What is so important at this site?”

Harry’s eyes narrow. Now he’s interested.

“You can’t tell me more than that?”

I hold my breath, not willing to miss a thing.

“Yeah, I know you’d never insist if it wasn’t important. But the timing’s not good.” Daddy lets out a deep breath. “Well, let me think about it. How can I reach you?”

The faint scratch of pencil against paper reaches my straining ears.

“Okay. I’ll get back to you. Good-bye.” Silence follows, disrupted only by the distinct rattle of the handset landing on the base, followed by footsteps heading back down the hallway.

I lean toward Harry. “What do you think that was about?”

Harry shrugs. “I don’t know, but I have a feeling we’ll

be missing a few days of school. When has he ever turned down fieldwork?"

Harry's right. The exciting lure of a new find is always too enticing for Daddy to resist. Mama loves to tell the story of how their honeymoon to Florida was cut short, and they spent the rest of their first week of marriage in Louisiana at an archeological site.

Fine with me. At least it will get me out of taking this spelling test.

We pull up alongside the other cars parked in front of a white, two-story home with a large front porch. Three men standing out front stop their conversation and watch us. Daddy opens the door of our Chevy and gets out of the car. Harry and I do the same. The drive from our home in Iowa to this small town outside of Kansas City took a few hours, and I'm ready to stretch my legs. Daddy places his hat on his slicked-back dark hair and smooths out his cardigan.

One of the men grins. He drops his cigarette, twisting it in the dirt with the toe of his brown dress shoe then walks toward us. He reaches out to shake hands with Daddy. "Mac, good to see you."

Daddy shakes with his right hand and pats the man's shoulder with his left. "Joe, it's great to see you."

Joe turns to his colleagues. "Gentleman, this is my good buddy, Mackenzie Turner."

The men all shake hands and finish their introductions, then Daddy presents us. "These are my children, Harry

and Grace.” He adjusts the brim of his hat. “Okay, Joe. You have thoroughly piqued my curiosity. Now that we’re here, what’s your big discovery?”

Joe grins. “Right this way.” He rolls up his shirt sleeves as he walks up the steps.

We follow Daddy and Joe into the house. Nothing stands out. Just an ordinary home in an ordinary small town—except maybe for the piles of boxes lining the walls of the front room. An old Victrola radio on a table next to a floral armchair are the only pieces of furniture in sight. Reminds me of my grandmother’s parlor.

Joe stops inside the living room. “The homeowner recently passed away, and the daughter has decided to sell the property.” He pats a stack of boxes. “She and her husband have been cleaning out the house and came across something unusual.”

He motions for us to follow him down a narrow hallway. At the end, a bright light shines on a brick wall. Or at least what’s left of the wall. The center bricks have been chipped away, creating a rough archway.

Daddy stops and runs a hand along the bricks. He looks at Joe with raised eyebrows. “Okay, this is interesting.”

Joe nods. “This wall was hidden by a large armoire. When the daughter and her husband moved it, they found this bricked-in doorway. Naturally, they wondered what lay behind it.”

Joe ducks and squeezes through the passageway. Daddy follows, disappearing from view. Harry and I scurry after them. The bright light illuminates a stone

stairwell. I keep one hand on the rough wall as I follow Harry down the steep stone steps. The narrow staircase takes a right turn then continues down another flight.

Before I reach the bottom of the stairs, Daddy's low whistle reaches my ears. I emerge into a large stone room. More bright lights are set up throughout the space, revealing a dozen or so round tables and stacks of chairs pushed to the sides of the room. A huge, dark wooden counter takes up one entire wall.

"A speakeasy?" Daddy wanders around the room, examining everything with narrow-eyed intrigue.

Joe looks quite pleased with himself. "It would appear so."

I lean toward Harry. "What's a speakeasy?"

His eyes widen. "I learned about them last year when our history class was talking about the 1920s. During the prohibition years, alcohol was illegal, so mobsters created hidden taverns."

My mouth drops open. Mobsters? Good gravy!

Daddy finishes his initial sweep around the room. "Well, this is certainly a fascinating find, but I'm still not sure why you wanted me to see it in person."

"Because of this." Joe walks toward a large open crate about the size of my bed.

There's more? I glance at Harry. His eyes reflect the same excitement that's speeding up my heartbeat. We join the two men, who are peering into the crate. Daddy slowly examines the contents—a mishmash of paintings, sculptures, and various other large and small items.

Joe hands him a document. "This was inside."

Daddy's forehead creases as he studies it. The moment recognition hits, his face transforms.

His head whips toward Joe. "The Sultana?"

Joe offers a toothy grin. "Yes. Can you believe it, Mac? After all these years, we finally have proof of our theory."

After checking into the small inn down the block, we meet Joe for supper. Harry and I hope to hear the rest of the story. We'd peppered Daddy with a million questions after leaving the house, but he just said he'd explain later.

The two of us sit patiently as the two old friends catch up on their lives. I shift in my seat—enough of the boring stuff. Come on, get to the story.

Once we place our food order with Mrs. Murphy—the owner of the inn, whose red curls make her look like Lucille Ball—our excruciating wait is finally over.

Joe turns to look at Harry and me. "I'm sure you kids have a lot of questions."

I nod. "Yes, who's the Sultana?" Sounds awfully exotic. Harry and I have been trying to figure it out all afternoon. All kinds of possibilities swirl through our brains. My best guess is that the Sultana is a mysterious rich woman from a foreign country. Harry pictures an illusionist like Houdini.

Daddy places his hands on the table. "The Sultana was a steamship."

Disappointment tugs at my heart. A steamship? That's not exciting at all.

Joe chuckles, his gaze on my expression. "After the Civil War, the Sultana was dispatched to take soldiers home. She was heading up the Mississippi River, traveling from Mississippi to St. Louis." His eyes widen. "But she never reached her destination. The Sultana sank near Memphis."

Daddy leans forward. "Actually, it remains the worst maritime disaster in U.S. history."

"Worse than the Titanic?" Harry asks.

Daddy nods. "Yes. More people died in the Sultana sinking."

Wow. But . . . "What does that have to do with the talk-easy?"

Joe chuckles again. "Speakeasy."

"That's a great question, Grace," Daddy says. "One I'd love to hear the answer to as well."

The conversation comes to a halt when Mrs. Murphy delivers our food. Joe digs into his meal but stops and waits patiently while Harry, Daddy, and I say our prayers.

I'm anxious to hear more of the story, but my companions are more concerned with consuming their meals. How frustrating. Discoveries are waiting to be made, and mysteries need to be uncovered. Harry nudges me with his knee to stop my tapping foot. My brother's patience never ceases to amaze me.

Finally, Joe takes a sip of water, then wipes his mouth with his napkin. He looks my way and winks. The anticipation has twisted my insides into a knot of anxiousness and I'm pretty sure Joe knows it and is enjoying my turmoil. He leans back. "The house down the

road once belonged to Eddie Manzanelli.”

Daddy sets his fork down. “Eddie the Bull?”

Who the heck is Eddie the Bull?

Joe nods, a satisfied smirk on his face.

Harry dips a French fry into his ketchup. How can he eat at a time like this?

Daddy glances at me like he’s not sure he wants to say anything more in front of me. I want to beg, but if I act like a little kid, he’ll never share the story. So, I pick up my fork and swirl it through my spaghetti, pretending to be as unconcerned as Harry.

I guess the strategy worked, because he starts talking. “Eddie the Bull was one of the trusted advisors to the mobster Sugarhouse Pete.”

What is with these names? They sound like characters from Harry’s comic books.

“Pete DiGiovanni happened to be a collector of historical artifacts,” Joe tells us.

Daddy leans back. “That explains a lot.”

What? Does he have a screw loose? That explains nothing!

Daddy and Joe huddle together, practically talking over each other. I look at Harry. He knows me well and shakes his head no. I know I should listen. I really do. I ought to be patient and wait for the men to bring us back into the conversation, but I just can’t do it.

“What’s so special about the Sultana?”

Harry sighs and closes his eyes. Joe and Daddy stare at me. In my head, my mother’s voice scolds me for my rude

outburst. *Grace Elizabeth Turner, you need to show some manners, young lady!*

I wait for my father's stern rebuke, but instead, Joe elbows Daddy. "Mac, she's got your fiery passion."

Daddy chuckles. "And my patience . . . or lack thereof."

Harry nudges me with his knee again. This time the silent message is positive: *You are one lucky girl!*

I make a mental note to tell Father O'Brien about disrespecting my elders during my next Confession.

Joe claps his hands together. "Okay. Here's the story. One summer years ago, your father and I were working on a dig site along the banks of the Mississippi. As we unearthed Indian artifacts, we got to talking about the Sultana. You see, the boat was carrying home more than the soldiers. She was also loaded with precious items being sent to St. Louis for safe-keeping until things settled down after the war."

"Tensions were quite high after the Civil War ended." Daddy pushes away his plate. "Many museums, churches, and private collectors gathered important items and sent them out West to be protected until things settled down in the war-torn states."

Joe reaches for his water glass. "A manifest existed of the items, but after the ship sank, many were never recovered."

"They're at the bottom of the river?" Harry asks.

Daddy rubs his jaw. "Yes, that was the theory. However, rumors suggested that some items made it off the ship."

Whoa, Nellie. "And that's what you believed?"

Joe snaps his fingers and points at me. "You got it. We thought maybe the items were still out there somewhere. Your dad and I looked into some of the theories but never found any promising leads."

Daddy shakes his head. "And somehow, the DiGiovanni family came into possession of the items."

"We'll probably never know how that happened, but I'm guessing that when the feds started swarming Kansas City and closed in on the family's operation, Eddie took the items to his 'establishment' down the road here, for safe-keeping."

I pick up my milkshake, satisfied. Lost artifacts, a sunken ship, a mob family. I can't wait to tell Mama.

Harry's vibrating snores wake me the next morning. I provide a wake-up call of my own by throwing my pillow at his head, which jerks him wide awake.

"Good morning." I smile sweetly.

"Yeah," he murmurs through his yawn.

I climb out of bed and find a note from Daddy on the dresser.

I'm over at the house. Come on by after you have breakfast.

He's probably been up for hours. Daddy can never get his projects out of his mind.

We dress and clamber down the stairs to the restaurant. Mrs. Murphy waves at us as we slide into a booth by the front window.

"Good morning, you two." She sets two glasses of

orange juice on our table. “I promised your daddy that I would get you fed. So, two specials coming up.”

“Thank you.” My mouth waters in anticipation. Last night’s dinner was delicious—once I finally got around to eating it. “Would it be possible to order a cup of cocoa as well?”

“Sure thing, sweetheart.” She looks at Harry. “Would you like one too?”

He nods. “Yes, ma’am. Thank you.”

I peer out the window toward the mobster house. “I wonder if we’ll uncover anything new today.”

“Doubt it. We’ll probably have to entertain ourselves. Daddy and Joe will be looking over and categorizing all those items.”

I rest my elbows on the table and drop my chin onto my hands. “Yeah, you’re probably right. Now comes the boring part.” Harry and I have gotten pretty good over the years at entertaining ourselves while Daddy works.

Mrs. Murphy arrives, carrying a tray that holds two plates and two mugs. After lowering it onto the next table, she reaches for the drinks. “I’ll tell you what, I’ve known all about that house my whole life.” She sets the brimming mugs in front of us.

The chocolatey foam looks so enticing, but I wait before indulging myself. I’m curious about what she’s going to tell us.

“Is that so?” Harry obviously wants to know more as well.

She nods, glances over her shoulder as if to make sure

no one is listening, and then leans close. "Yep. Believe it or not, my mother was a cocktail waitress there at one time."

"Wow!" Scandalous!

She smiles at my excitement. "We have always been a nice law-abiding community, but times were tough, and this little town profited from that 'unique' establishment. The stores, inns, and restaurants all appreciated the extra business provided by the patrons of the speakeasy."

"That makes sense." Harry sips from his mug.

Mrs. Murphy turns to get our breakfast plates. When she sets them in front of us, I stare at the food. Maybe I'm not hungry after all. The scrambled eggs and hash browns are green. At least the bacon looks edible.

She chuckles. "I guess you don't realize what day it is."

I look up at her. "Um . . . Wednesday?"

"It's St. Patrick's Day. I always make green food to celebrate. Wait until you see the green mashed potatoes I'm serving tonight." She picks up the empty tray and starts to walk away but looks back at us after only a couple of steps. "Did they find the second hidden room yet?"

My gaze goes from her to Harry then back. "Second room?"

She nods. "Sure. There's the large lounge area, of course, but that's not all. The patrons needed a place to hide and a way to escape if the police arrived." With a broad smile she walks away.

Harry and I clink our mugs together. Today may not be as boring as we previously thought.

As soon as we get to the house, Daddy sets us to work. He isn't nearly as excited about finding the second room as we are but promises that when we finish with our work, we can explore.

The large items have already been removed from the crate and taken upstairs, where Joe and his assistants are working. They claimed they preferred working in the natural light. More likely they wanted easier access to the porch for their smoke breaks. Yuck.

That leaves Daddy, Harry, and I in charge of the smaller items, which still need to be catalogued. We don't often get to assist him with his work, so I'm determined to do it perfectly. Since we have the stone basement room to ourselves, we create a little assembly line. I'm assigned to carefully remove items from the giant crate one by one and tag them. Harry then uses our father's 35mm camera to take several photos of each piece. Daddy keeps busy writing down detailed descriptions.

I carefully unwrap a beautiful porcelain doll with a painted face. After tagging it, I hand it to Harry. "What will happen to all of these items?"

"We will attempt to match each of them with the Sultana manifest then try and track down the original owners." Daddy runs his hand along a smooth ceramic vase he is now examining. "Although, I'm guessing from the way the items were haphazardly placed in the crate, there are pieces here that weren't on the Sultana but were treasures Pete DiGiovanni collected over the years." He points to a metal circle in front of him. "For instance, this

campaign button is from the William McKinley presidential campaign in the late 1800s, years after the Civil War.”

Harry pulls the camera away from his face. “How on earth will the rightful owners ever be tracked down then?”

Daddy finishes jotting something down. “Those items that can’t be traced will most likely find homes in various museums.”

A small item wedged beneath an old Bible catches my eye. I reach in the crate and pull out a green stone kinda shaped like a shamrock. Different shades of green and brown run through the rough rock like veins. A leather strand loops through a chiseled hole, making the stone a necklace. What a perfect find for St. Patrick’s Day.

An unexpected thud from above makes me jump. Loud voices disturb our peaceful work. Daddy’s head turns toward the stone staircase. The raised voices turn to angry shouts.

“I’d better check on that.” Daddy lays down his pencil and heads up the steps.

Harry sets the camera aside as we patiently wait for Daddy to return. What could be going on?

A bone-jarring, reverberating blast stops all the shouting.

I gasp.

Harry grabs my arm. “That was a gunshot.”

“Daddy.” The word barely makes it out of my dry mouth.

“Come on, we’ve got to hide.” My big brother pulls me

across the room and behind the massive wooden bar. We cower in the corner, straining to hear any sounds.

Heavy footsteps soon pound down the stairs. Echoing stomps fill the room. I cower into a tighter ball as icy fear floods through my veins.

“Look at all this loot.” The deep voice bears a sharp accent.

“Grab what you want, but you know our orders—we’re torching the rest. Everything needs to be destroyed.”

I squeeze my hands together and realize I’m still holding the unique necklace. I stroke the stone in an attempt to control my quaking hands. Harry makes the Sign of the Cross, and I force myself to join him in silent prayer.

Dear Lord, please protect us. Blessed Mother Mary, pray for us.

My fingers stroke the curves of the shamrock, reminding me that today is the feast day of St. Patrick and how he used the shamrock shape in his teachings. *Holy Trinity, help us.*

I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself, but the sharp stench of gasoline terrifies me. They are going to burn this place, with us in it!

St. Patrick, pray for our safety and a way to escape.

Mrs. Murphy’s words from this morning rush into my mind. The patrons of the speakeasy needed a place to hide. Somewhere a second hidden room exists! *But where is it?* I squeeze my eyes shut and picture the room. All the walls are made of rough gray stone. Where could a secret door

be located?

My fingers brush the smooth wood of our hiding place. These panels would be excellent camouflage. I crawl along the perimeter of the bar, pushing on the wood. Finally, one moves in a smooth, silent slide, revealing an opening. I yank on Harry's hand and pull him with me.

As we scramble into the space, I notice another stone staircase leading into darkness.

"Good thinking!" Harry whispers as he slides the wooden door shut.

I'm not sure I agree. The complete darkness that now entombs us is almost as terrifying as being in the same rooms with those thugs. But at least we're safe for the moment.

My forced gratefulness is short-lived as the horrifying scent of smoke sneaks into our hiding place. Panicked, we feel around in the pitch dark and blindly make our way down the stone staircase. I run my hands along the slightly damp stones, letting my imagination run away with me. How many spiders must call this place home? My saddle shoes stick to each step that takes us further down into the unknown. As we go, the muffled sounds from above grow faint, while the stale, dank mustiness increases. The moldy odor of the cellar intermixed with the acrid, smoky fumes turns my stomach. Oh, what I wouldn't give for some clean fresh air! After what feels like an hour, we reach the last step and huddle together in the dark void.

I wipe a tear from my face. "Harry, I'm scared."

He puts his arm around me. "Me, too. Let's pray."

“Oh! Let’s ask St. Patrick to pray for us.”

“Um . . . ” The doubt in his voice reflects our dire situation.

“It helped last time,” I insist. “Right after I asked him to pray for us, I thought of the hidden room. Today is his feast day. Surely if any saint would be able to ask for God’s help, it would be the saint of the day.”

“I’m not sure that makes any sense, but sure, why not? But we also need to say a Hail Mary and an Our Father.”

I rub my thumb along the rough edges of the stone shamrock. “Saint Patrick, please pray for us. We sure could use any extra help and prayers.”

I begin to recite the other prayers along with Harry when another thought bombards my mind. “Harry, Mrs. Murphy said the speakeasy patrons used this room so they could escape. That means there has to be an exit!”

“Huh. That makes sense.” A spark of hope infiltrates the despair in his voice. “Hold onto my shirt, and we’ll feel our way around the room. Maybe we can find another door.”

I shove the necklace in my pocket and cling to my brother’s shirt. We slowly inch along, running our hands against the rough, clammy stone wall, our feet shuffling along a dirt floor. As we venture further from the house, the sounds of our scuffled footsteps and heavy breathing shifts, the timbre closing in around us. Could we now be in some sort of tunnel?

The further we journey into this underground cavern, the cooler the air becomes. I resist the urge to pull my

sweater tighter around me, not daring to drop my hand from the wall or relinquish my death-grip on Harry's shirt. Minute after minute slowly creeps past before Harry abruptly stops. My nose smashes into his shoulder. Ouch!

"Why'd you stop moving?" I rub my nose.

"We reached a corner. Oh! It's a staircase."

We crouch down then proceed to crawl up the steps. Peering through the darkness, I can't tell if my eyes are playing tricks or if there is a sliver of light above us. Blinking doesn't make it go away, so the thin yellow strip becomes my beacon of hope.

We finally reach a wooden door.

Harry fumbles around till he finds a knob and twists it. "It's locked."

Aargh! "We can't give up." I bang on the door.

Harry grabs my arm. "What if the bad guys hear us?"

I lean against the exit, blinking back tears. How will we escape? *Oh, Saint Patrick, please keep praying for us.*

Oh! Of course! "Harry! If this was an emergency exit, then there had to be a way to get out. They wouldn't have kept it unlocked because they didn't want just anyone coming in." I run my hands around the icky-damp walls. "Maybe there's a key."

Harry joins in my frantic search. "Another good idea, Grace."

"I think it's Saint Patrick somehow inspiring me."

"Found it!"

For the next few moments, Harry tries to slide the key into the lock. The eventual click is the greatest sound I've

ever heard.

Harry shoves on the door with his shoulder, inching it open about half a foot. He grunts, then leans against the wooden portal. "Something must be blocking it."

"I think I can squeeze through." Sometimes it's good to be little. I shimmy my way through the opening. Soon I'm standing in the middle of a forest. The afternoon light filters through overgrown trees and bushes that have practically entombed the long-forgotten exit, which is set into a hill. I yank the vines and branches, and soon we're able to force the door open enough for Harry to escape.

He pushes himself through the narrow opening and wraps his arms around me in a rare display of emotion.

I hug him back then glance around the towering trees that surround us. "Now what? How do we get back to the house?"

Harry bites his lower lip and points over my shoulder. I turn. Billowing smoke pollutes the blue sky above the treetops. Dread grips my heart. *Daddy*. But before we can plan our next move, the welcome sound of screeching sirens permeates the unsettling quiet.

Thank goodness! We exchange a smile then sprint toward the edge of the woods.

Present Day

Luke stares at Grandma, waiting for her to continue, but she smoothly spreads frosting across the cookie in front of her, seemingly content with her story's ending.

“Grandma, what happened next?” Celia sets down her knife, which has remained poised mid-air as she anticipated the finale of the story.

Grandma looks up, surprised. “What?”

“Don’t act all innocent.” Austin points his half-eaten cookie toward her. “You know that was a lousy place to end the story.”

Grandma laughs. “I wasn’t sure if I was boring you or not.”

Luke loosens his grip on the container of green sprinkles in his hand. Surely there was more to the story. “Did all the items burn?”

“Was your dad hurt?” Celia slips on the oven mitt to rescue the last tray of cookies from the beeping oven.

Austin takes another bite. “Who were those guys? More mobsters?”

“And what did your mom have to say about it all?” The oven door shuts, and Celia sets the hot cookie tray on top of the stove.

“I guess I did leave you hanging just a bit.” Grandma removes her glasses and places them on top of her head. They instantly disappear amid her curls. “Well, as it happened, Mrs. Murphy was walking over to the house to deliver a tray of green cupcakes when the men stormed the home. She ran back to the inn and called the police. Those men were members of the DiGiovanni family. When the news broke that items were found at Eddie the Bull’s old speakeasy, they worried that incriminating paperwork about the family’s illegal operations would be discovered.

They might have slipped away, but in their hurry to leave the area, they sped right past a patrol car and were pulled over. And amazingly, despite some smoke damage, most of the items survived.”

She reaches for one of the cooled cookies. “Those thugs had tied up Joe and his associates at gunpoint. Daddy, on the other hand, put up a fight, trying to get back to us, so he was a little roughed up.” She laughs. “He was pretty proud of his black eye since it made for a great story to share with his class the next week. Mama, however, was not too happy about our little misadventure. In fact, that was the last time I remember ever staying home alone with Daddy for any extended period of time.”

“Wow. I can’t believe you never told us about this.” Austin licks his fingers.

Celia gives their younger brother a look and points toward the faucet. Austin sighs then slinks over to the sink to wash his hands.

Satisfied, Celia turns back to Grandma. “I agree, how could you not tell us?”

Grandma sifts through the pile of cookie cutters. “It wasn’t a story to tell little children. And we stopped getting together on St. Patrick’s Day, so I just never thought about sharing it.”

A stab of regret hits Luke for their missed years of cookie-decorating. At least they’re here today. “Well, thanks for telling us. So, do you still think Saint Patrick helped you that day?”

Grandma picks up an unfrosted shamrock-shaped

cookie. "Yes, I do. You know, saints are our heavenly friends. Not only can they inspire us to be better people, but because they are so close to God, they can intercede on our behalf."

Luke looks down at his hands. Maybe he should ask his confirmation saint to pray for him as he makes his big college decision. Couldn't hurt. Maybe he'd even ask for Saint Patrick's help.

Celia transfers the last of the cookies from the baking sheet to the cooling rack. "What happened to the necklace? Was it sent to a museum?"

"No." Grandma smiles at the shamrock shape in her hand. "That stone shamrock was not on the Sultana's manifest, so they never were able to track down where it had come from. Joe knew how much I liked it so he insisted I keep it."

"Do you still have it?" Austin reaches for another frosted cookie.

Grandma shakes her head. "I kept it for a while, but it didn't feel right to just store it in my jewelry box. Even though the rightful owners couldn't be found, I believed it had some significance since the items in that crate had come from a museum, private collection, or church. Keeping it wasn't the right thing to do. That special stone was meant to be shared with others."

"So, what did you do with it?" Celia settles back on her stool.

Grandma brushes some flour off the back of her hand. "A few months after our ordeal, my father told me about a

friend of his whose family was going through a challenging time. After praying about it, I felt sure that Saint Patrick could be of assistance to them as well. So, I encouraged Daddy to send the necklace overseas to his friend.”

Austin snaps a frosted rainbow cookie in half and pops a hunk in his mouth. “That’s so cool.”

Luke stares at a shamrock-shaped cookie in front of him. “I wonder who else Saint Patrick helped. Who received your stone necklace, you know?”

Grandma smiles. “I’ve thought about that over the years. Wouldn’t it be incredible to know who else has been blessed because of that beautiful stone?”

Luke nodded. Wouldn’t it indeed . . .

###

Separating fact from fiction: The Sultana was a real ship that sank in the Mississippi River transporting troops home from the Civil War. The DiGiovanni family was a crime family in Kansas City during the 1920s. The author has visited an old speakeasy in a beautiful little town outside of Kansas City. The links between these facts, as written in this story, are purely a result of her imagination.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LESLEA WAHL is the author of the award-winning Catholic teen mysteries *The Perfect Blindside*, *An Unexpected Role*, *Where You Lead*, and *eXtreme Blindside*. The characters in this short story, Luke, Celia, Austin, and Grandma Grace, appear in her newest adventurous novel, *A Summer to Treasure*. Leslea's journey to become an author came through a search for value-based fiction for her own children. She now not only writes for teens but also has become a reviewer of Catholic teen fiction to help other families discover faith-based books. Leslea lives in beautiful Colorado with her husband and children. The furry, four-legged members of her family often make cameo appearances in her novels. Leslea has always loved mysteries and hopes to encourage teens to grow in their faith through these fun adventures. For more information about her faith-filled Young Adult mysteries, please visit www.LesleaWahl.com.

