

LUCKY

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Chapter One

Luciana Armstrong stood in the bathroom of a gas station in Idaho, close to the Nevada border. She was wearing a white blouse, navy blazer, matching skirt, and low heels. Her hair was tied back in a neat bun. “Goodbye, Alaina,” she said to her reflection— and tried to ignore the sadness. She had been sure Alaina was going to stick around.

She took off her clothes and shoved them in her handbag. Then she pulled out a minidress and a pair of stilettos. She snaked the dress over her body, smoothed down the gold-beaded material, felt a twinge of sadness as her hands passed over her flat stomach, shook out her hair. A stranger was reflected back at her now.

“Hello, Lucky,” she said.

In the gas station convenience store, she roamed the aisles. A man buying cigarettes whistled at her as she tried to decide between cheese puffs or pretzels. She grabbed both and approached the register, skimming the newspaper headlines as she waited: DAY OF RECKONING ON WALL STREET; ANALYSTS PREDICT 2008 MARKET CRASH WILL BE WORST OF ALL TIME. Then a cardboard stand on the counter caught her attention: MULTI MILLIONS LOTTERY, it said. Reading it, she was ten years old again, hurtling down the I-90 to who-knows-where-next with her father. “You’re the luckiest girl in the world,” he had always told her. And he had always bought a lottery ticket when they stopped at a gas station rest stop like this one. “We’ll never win, but we can hope,” he often said. “The lottery is the greatest con of all time, kiddo. Proves our government is just like us, tricking people into thinking any dream can come true.” When he said things like that it made Lucky feel better about who they were, and the things they did.

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She reached the cash register. Impulsively, Lucky grabbed a lottery playslip from the stand and filled out her numbers, the same ones she had used just for fun when she was a kid: Eleven, because that was how old she had been when she had thought to have lucky numbers. Eighteen, because that was the age she couldn't wait to be at the time, thinking adulthood was going to unleash some sort of magic into her life. Forty-two, because that was how old her dad had been when she had come up with the numbers. Ninety-five, because that was the highway they were driving on that day. And seventy-seven, just because.

She handed the paper to the cashier. He printed off her lottery ticket and handed it back. "You should sign your name on that," he said. "People forget, and then their ticket gets stolen or lost. It's a big jackpot this time, three hundred and ninety million."

"I have a higher chance of being struck by lightning, *twice*, than I do of winning that jackpot," Lucky said. "It's just a dream, that's all." Then she turned, ducked her head as she walked past the security cameras and out into the parking lot. She put the ticket in her wallet and imagined herself in a beach house in Dominica, taking the ticket out once in a while and remembering her dad—before he had landed in prison.

Outside, her boyfriend, Cary, had finished filling their silver Audi's gas tank. He saw her, grinned, and mouthed the word *Damn*. She blew a kiss at him and walked toward the car, letting her hips sway. But a voice made her turn.

"Could you spare any change?"

A woman was sitting with her back against the concrete wall of the station, holding a sign that said UNEMPLOYED, BROKE, ANYTHING HELPS. Lucky took out her wallet. She emptied it of several hundred— then paused and pulled the blouse, skirt, blazer, and shoes from her bag.

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Take these,” Lucky said.

“Where would I ever wear them?”

“Sell them on consignment. Or . . .” Lucky leaned down. “Use them to pretend to be someone else.”

The woman blinked at her, confused. “*What?*”

“Never mind. Just . . . take care, okay?”

Cary was grinning as she walked toward him again. She got in the car and he grabbed her chin, turned her face to his, kissed her mouth. “You’re looking damn hot, Mrs. . . . what did we register at the hotel as, Anderson? I think it’s great that you went in there looking like an investment banker and came out looking like the girl I used to know. You never dress like this anymore. I *like*. And now I see why you wanted to go to Vegas so badly.” He let go and she felt something shift between them. “But it’s funny that you’re always thinking you can, I don’t know, redeem yourself or something by giving money out to people like her. Soon you won’t feel that need anymore. Soon you’ll forget all about it.”

She felt suddenly irritated. “People ‘like her’? And I’m not trying to redeem myself. I’m trying to help people who need help.”

“Why?”

Out the window, the woman had her hand lifted in a wave, but Lucky looked away.

“Make up for the money we’ve stolen by acting like Robin Hood?” Cary went on. “Steal from the rich, give to the poor? It’s cute, I guess.” He started the car and pulled out. “But it’s never going to work. We are who we are, Lucky.” He had a way of digging straight down to the painful secret spots in a person’s psyche. And, not for the first time recently, she felt a niggling

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sense of worry about this. They were moving to a remote island together. It was just going to be the two of them. They would never be able to leave.

Cary merged with the traffic on the highway and turned up the stereo. A thumping techno beat filled the car. He glanced at her and smiled, and she smiled back.

“This is going to be fun,” she said to him, hoping to convince them both.

“Sure. It is. We need some fun. Blaze of glory, right?”

She opened a bag of pretzels and tilted it toward him. They were just a regular couple on a road trip, nothing to fear. “What will it be like, in Dominica, do you think? What kind of house will we live in?” It had been like a game, back when they had first met, to dream of the life they were going to build, construct a future in their minds. They hadn’t had much time to dream about this next incarnation of their lives, given that they were leaving in such a rush. “Oceanfront, obviously— but, what do you think, pool or no pool?”

“Mmm?” Cary reached into the bag and grabbed a handful of pretzels, then glanced in the rearview mirror again.

“No pool,” Lucky decided. “Who needs it when you have the ocean, right? And we’ll get a dog—a rescue, like Betty was, and go for long walks with her on the beach every day.” The words dried up as soon as she mentioned Betty. The LOST DOG signs were still posted on poles around their neighborhood in Boise. The loss of Betty was yet another ache inside her empty body.

“Do you think someone found her?” Lucky said. “Someone good?” Cary glanced at her now, before turning his attention back to the highway.

“Found who?”

“Betty.” There was a lump in her throat.

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“Sure. Bet she’s being well taken care of right now. Don’t you worry about her. Betty will land on her feet.” Cary took one hand off the steering wheel and reached for Lucky’s. “I know it’s hard. But everything is going to be fine.” His hand was clammy. He was scared, she could tell.

The truth? So was she.

September, 1992

THE ADIRONDACKS, NEW YORK

Lucky worked with her father, and this meant she’d been traveling around the country for as long as she could remember. She was only ten—going on thirty, her dad would say. She’d seen a lot of the world. She knew things.

For example, Lucky already knew that money didn’t just come to you; you had to chase it. Which was often exhausting. “Some people have to hustle harder than others,” her father would say. “You come by your name honestly, though. You’re luckier than most when it comes to money. But you still have to hone that luck. Make sure it never leaves your side. That’s going to be a hard job.”

For the first time, they were going to have an honest-to-goodness vacation, though. They’d recently had a run of good luck, and her father was feeling flush. He was taking her to a fancy hotel in the Adirondacks. “No work for a whole week. Just reading, relaxing, swimming, doing whatever you want.”

Lucky pressed her face to the car window, then touched the gold crucifix she always wore around her neck. It had been hers since she was a baby, a gift from her long-lost mother, one of the few possessions she carried with her when they traveled, the only thing she had that was really hers.^[P]_[SEP]Lucky was in the back seat, surrounded by books that had been

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“borrowed” from the library in the town before last. Stealing library books made Lucky feel guiltier than almost anything else, but her dad would say it was the government that paid for those books—and that the government owed them. Besides, they needed the books because she was homeschooled—“road schooled,” he called it.

They sped past a sign that said WELCOME TO NEW YORK, THE EMPIRE STATE.

“Hey, isn’t this where I was born? Around here somewhere?”

“You were born in New York City,” her father said. “Not out here in the mountains.”

“But isn’t this where my mother is from, though? Around here somewhere? Didn’t you say that? That Gloria Devereaux was from here?”

“Did I?”

Lucky put aside the book she had been reading, *The Elegant Universe*. She didn’t know that other ten-year-olds were reading Goosebumps stories, not books about string theory. She didn’t know any other ten-year-olds. “Yes. You did. You came home one night from a poker game and I asked you where Gloria was from, and you said ‘Adirondacks.’”

“You shouldn’t ask me questions when I’ve been drinking too much, which I probably was after that poker game. Say, what’s in that book you’re reading?”

“Tell me a story about my mother,” Lucky pressed. “Tell me about Gloria.”

“I need to focus on the road.” This was a lie; her father could drive on a freeway blindfolded.

“Come on,” Lucky said. “Just tell me one tiny thing.”

“I came home one night from buying you formula, and, poof, she was gone” was all her father had ever said about her mother’s departure. He made it sound final, like Lucky’s mother had completely disappeared—but she had to exist somewhere out there, didn’t she?

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When Lucky got like this, when she prodded for more information, her father's reaction was almost never good. Sometimes he got mad and told her to stop poking at old wounds. Sometimes he said it was cruel of her to bring up things that made him feel so sad. But every once in a while he'd relent and throw her a crumb.

"Why was this necklace so special to her? Why did she leave it behind for me to have? If she didn't want anything to do with me, why did she leave *anything* behind for me at all?"

Lucky thought he might not answer. But then, "She attended St. Monica's Parish," her father allowed. "That necklace was a gift from a nun who lived there."

"Parish?" Lucky repeated.

"Yeah, like a church."

Lucky had never been inside a church. "What happens?" she asked. "At church?"

More silence. Then, "There's a lot of talk about what it means to be a good person. About what God might do to you if you're bad. Where he might send you. About hell."

"Oh." Lucky frowned. She'd heard of hell but hadn't given the idea much thought. People sometimes told her father to go to hell.

She touched the necklace and gazed out the window again at the velvety-looking Adirondack Mountains coming into focus. As little as she knew about religion, about what made you good and what made you bad, she worried that she and her father were definitely bad. They lied, they stole, they snuck around. She had read enough books about heroes and villains to know which side they were on.

There were a dozen more questions she wanted to ask her father now, but perhaps she didn't really want the answers. She picked up her book again as her father tuned the car radio to the Yankees game.

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“Another hour or so, kiddo. Sit back and relax. We’re going to have a great week.”

Eventually they approached the elegant hotel, which sat on an island attached to the mainland by a short bridge. The island was surrounded by the glittery water of Lake George.

“Nixon stayed here,” her father said as they approached the Sagamore. This prompted a short lecture studded with facts. “Nixon actually did some *good* things,” he concluded as he pulled the car around a circular driveway and landed it in front of a stately white building. “But it got lost in all the bad. That’s usually what happens.”

Lucky admired the turrets and balconies and stained-glass windows of the hotel, then turned her focused attention on the people milling about.

“Between this and all your book reading, that’s school done for the day, kiddo.”

Lucky barely heard him. It was a long shot, she knew, but she was still looking for her mother, searching the faces of the guests and staff. She had another clue now: Her mother had gone to church. She’d had a friend who was a nun.

A valet approached. She unrolled the window and stuck her head out. The air was fresh. This was going to be a perfect week. Lucky could feel it.

Upstairs, inside their hotel room—which had a large window with a view of the mountains, lake, and resort grounds—Lucky’s father put down his battered suitcase, which was covered in stickers from all the places they’d been. He flopped down onto the bed closest to the window without taking off his shiny shoes, put his hands behind his head, sighed happily, and closed his eyes. Lucky put her smaller suitcase on the second bed, unzipped it, and began to unpack. She lifted out a yellow bathing suit and glanced at him.

“Can I go to the pool?”

“You’re on vacation, Lucky. You can do whatever the hell you want to.”

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“What if kids my age aren’t allowed at the pool by themselves?”

Her father’s eyes were closed. “Then just lie about your age,” he said.

Outside, Lucky wandered the hotel grounds for a while. She by-passed the crowded pool and walked down to the edge of the lake—but when she stepped into swim, a lifeguard blew his whistle at her and shouted, “You can’t swim there!”

Lucky turned and squinted. “Why not?”

The lifeguard pointed down the beach to a small area marked out by buoys. “That’s the swimming area!”

Lucky walked toward the swimming area. It was crowded. She stood by the water for a moment, surveying the writhing mass of bodies, the shouting adults and shrieking children. Then she turned and headed back toward the pool. There, she sat at the edge with her legs dangling in the water, in the quietest corner she could find—which wasn’t very quiet at all—and surveyed the children swimming, splashing, spitting, dunking. She watched one young boy swim to the edge and clutch the concrete, closing his eyes, rapt. A yellowish cloud bloomed in the water below him and she looked away, repulsed.

Then someone sat down beside her. It was a girl about her age with chestnut-brown hair that was as smooth and shiny as Lucky’s was coarse and corkscrew wild. The girl slid her legs into the water, too, and Lucky looked down at her feet. The girl had a toe ring and it glinted in the sun.

“Isn’t it ridiculous?” she said.

Lucky was startled. “Yes,” she managed to reply, wanting to agree with whatever it was this girl said.

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“I mean, there’s this whole beautiful lake, and they expect us to swim in there.” She pointed toward the beach and the tiny swimming area, then turned back to Lucky and the pool. “Or in here. No *thank you*.”

Lucky tried to size the girl up, but she wasn’t used to sizing kids up. She got the sense that what you saw was what you got. “Yeah,” she said. “No thank you. That kid over there, I think he just peed.”

The girl hooted with laughter and pulled her legs out of the water. “Ew!”

Lucky pulled her legs out, too, and hugged them against herself. “Wanna go for a walk?” the girl said. “Around the corner, the lifeguard can’t see us and you can go for a proper swim.” She stood and Lucky scrambled to her feet, too. “I’m Steph, by the way.”

Lucky loved that name; it was on her list of favorites. “I’m Andrea,” she said, which was the alias she and her father had agreed upon for this trip. “Most people call me Andi.” She’d made this part up on the spot and was glad she had because Steph smiled.

“Andi. I like that,” she said. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Steph and “Andi” stayed out until the sun started to set over the water and the mountains went from gray-green to purple-blue. “My mom will be worried,” Steph said eventually. “I should get back.”

“Yeah, my dad will be, too,” Lucky said, even though that likely wasn’t true.

“It’s just you and your dad?”

Lucky nodded.

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“It’s just me and my mom,” Steph said. She’d started to stand but she flopped back down on the sand and Lucky waited to see what she would do next. The sky above them was turning a heavy blue now.

“My dad died,” Steph said.

“I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. I miss him.”

“How did he die?”

“Heart attack. He was really healthy—but I guess he had stress from work, or something. My mom always says if he hadn’t worked so hard, he’d still be here. She cries about the money we have. She gives it away to charity, says she wishes we were poor and that he were still alive. And sometimes I forget he’s dead and I look for him. Sorry. You probably don’t get it.”

“I do get it,” Lucky said. And then she added her lie, like a matching earring. “My mom died, too.” The made-up story flowed easily from her lips. She didn’t even feel guilty for it, because she wanted this so badly. When she was done talking, Steph reached for her hand and squeezed. The sun was almost down now. In the sky, a star flickered on, then held. Lucky squeezed Steph’s hand back; a tear slid down her cheek. She wasn’t crying because she was sad, and she wasn’t crying for her mother. For once, she was crying because she was happy. She had made a friend.

“All right, so let me get this straight,” her father said the next night. “I’m still Virgil, but you’re Andi for short. We’re from Lansing. Drove here for an end-of-summer treat. Came up

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through Toronto for fun, went to the top of the CN Tower. Your mother died last year. A rare blood disorder. It's brilliant, Lucky. Really, it is."

"I wasn't trying to be brilliant. I was just telling you in case you talked to her. I didn't want you to mess up my story. She's my fr—"

"I was chatting with her mother earlier. Name's Darla. I arranged that the four of us are going to have dinner. Guess we're not on vacation anymore, kiddo. We've got a job now. These people are loaded. Darla was wearing a tennis bracelet at the pool, for God's sake. Still wearing her ring but, thanks to you, I know she's a widow. Anyway, we're meeting them in half an hour and we have a little more of our story to get straight. We're going to tell them you're sick, too, with the same rare hereditary blood disorder that killed your mother. That I can't afford the treatments, that coming here was a wish you had and I wanted to grant it because—well, I just don't know how long you'll live."

"Dad. Please, do we have to? Isn't the one lie enough?"

He was fixing his tie in the mirror, but now he turned to her, perplexed.

"But we're only here for the week. Then we'll move on, as we always do, and you'll never see her again. She's not your friend. This is our job! Remember, we might be flush now, but our luck is always changing. And money doesn't last forever. I spent a hell of a lot of it on this week."

Lucky hung her head. "You said we were on vacation! You said that's all it was!"

Her father sighed and sat down beside her on her bed. "When an opportunity presents itself, you have to take it, kiddo. Or someone else will. I thought I taught you that. You can't let your guard down, ever. Not even when you're having fun—*especially* when you're having fun. Now come on, get moving. Fix your hair and dry your face. We're due downstairs."

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The next morning, Lucky sat at the edge of the pool and dipped her toes in. The concrete scraped at her thighs. Steph plopped down beside her and Lucky turned to look at her, trying to memorize her so she'd never forget this. Steph's hair cascaded down her shoulders. She had freckles on her nose, a crooked grin—but she wasn't smiling now.

“It's school next week,” Steph said, glum, as she put her feet in the water beside Lucky's. “Summer's almost over. I can't believe it.”

Lucky searched for a response, but then Steph realized something and frowned. “Sorry. You don't get to go to school. You're home-schooled. Because you're—”

In that moment, Lucky really felt it: sick. She felt ill at the idea of pretending to be sick to this person she was supposed to see as a “mark” but who she wanted to actually be able to call a friend. A real one. She felt sick all through her body, like she really did have the same rare blood disorder she had lied and said had killed the mother she had never actually met.

“I'm not sick,” Lucky said. The words burned out of her throat. Was she really about to betray her father, to go against his story? They'd have to leave the hotel. Right away. She'd never see Steph again. But still. Soon she was never going to see her again anyway—and, worse, her supposed friend was going to remember Lucky, remember this, for the rest of her life.

“My dad just says that,” Lucky continued, staring up, directly at the sun, willing it to burn her eyes blind. “I'm not sick. I'm fine. Perfectly healthy. Nothing is wrong with me.”

Steph turned. She reached forward and put her hand on top of Lucky's. “Really?” she asked.

“Really,” Lucky answered.

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Steph paused for a moment, considering. Then she said, “It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” Lucky said, and now she was crying. “It’s *not* okay.”

“I get it. You want to pretend you’re fine so that you will be fine. I heard my mom on the phone with her bank. It’s supposed to be a surprise, but she’s going to give your dad the money he needs for those procedures. You’re going to get better. Isn’t that *great*?”

Lucky was seeing black spots now. “Your mom shouldn’t do that—”

“Oh, Andi. It’s okay, we have *lots* of money. You’ll be able to go to school now. Maybe.” Lucky felt tears streaming down her cheeks to her jawbone, *plop, plop*, onto her collarbones. “Maybe you’ll move closer to *me*, maybe you’ll move to Bellevue and we’ll live near each other. I know my mom would like that. She really wants to see your dad again. And we’ll go to the same school, and it will be just perfect. And maybe”—she was grasping Lucky’s arm now—“our parents will get married. And we’ll be *sisters*. Come on, imagine it!”

Lucky looked away from the sun, blinked over and over until the world came back into focus, stared into the pool water, at their toes beneath it, side by side. Steph had given her a toe ring too; their matching rings glinted in the waves. Sister feet.

“I guess you never know,” Lucky said, lifting her hand away from Steph’s to rub at her cheeks until they were dry. But Steph reached up and grabbed her hand again.

“*I* know,” she said. “I know you’re going to be just fine. One day, it’s going to be as if this rare disease you have just . . . disappeared.”

“Yes, one day,” Lucky said. “That’s exactly what it’s going to be like.”