

## Temple City

By Joanne Chapman

Mom had dragged us half-way across the world, all for some new-fangled piece of redemption she was seeking. It wasn't like Danny and I had a choice. One day, before school even ended, she packed our lives into the back of the Ford LTD wagon and drove west. Her methods weren't known to be shrewd, mind you. For all I knew then, she'd played pin-the-tail with the map, and now we were headed to Salt Lake.

It was 1983. I, Elizabeth Hansen, was twelve; a veritable mess of skinny limbs, curly blonde hair, and freckles. That was the year five-year-old Danny took to calling me Lizzy, and it stuck. President Reagan was in his first term in the White House and nuclear war drills at school had still been all-the-rage. It's not like hiding under your desk would save you. Even I knew that.

The LTD wagon rambled on, on the edge of breakdown—but steady enough—across I-80. We passed Chicago and the Kellogg's cereal plant. I watched longingly out the window with thoughts of a normal-kid breakfast, all the while pulling at the stale crumbs of my gas-station doughnut. When we passed Nebraska and Nebraska some more, I was glad the pin hadn't fallen there. *Do people even find anything to do here?* I wondered. Staying entertained and being attentive were never skills I'd managed to master. Now on to a city I knew nothing about, except maybe it had a lake which I suspected had some salt.

The bump against a curb woke me. Mom cranked the wheel as the wagon ambled into a parking spot. The back seat smelled like corn chips and Danny's feet. I stretched and glanced out the window for something to ground me. Above us was a motel sign. "Temple City" flashed in the dim twilight, and an arrow pointed at a single-story row of rooms. Mom hopped out of the car.

"Don't let Danny get out," she said over her shoulder as she shut the door.

He was asleep, drool running down his chin. Didn't look to me like Danny was going anywhere at the moment. Rain began to patter on the car roof. Soon enough, Mom left the office, a room key dangling from one hand, the other holding a newspaper over her brunette head to ward off the raindrops.

She spent hours that night, pouring over the help-wanted section. Red X's and circles checkered the paper. The expression on her thin face grew stressed as Danny started to pace then superman from one bed to the other. I couldn't catch him. Besides, I wanted to join him...and did once or maybe twice.

The next day Mom made some phone calls, changed into a neat pin skirt and blouse, and stood before us waving a finger in the air. I always knew she meant business when she waved the finger.

"I'll only be gone for a few hours. Don't leave the room." She turned to open the door before she thought to add, "There're some twinkies from yesterday if you get hungry. Don't jump on the bed. I can't afford an emergency room visit." She bent over to give Danny a big smooch on the cheek. I backed away before she even got the idea in her head that I needed one too.

An hour went by. I couldn't find a decent channel on TV. All weather reports. It seems everyone was going haywire over a little rain. When we left New York there had been lots more rain. I didn't know why the news people were making such a big deal. Danny didn't care about the TV. He was occupied fine, making a castle out of the bed covers. He had tented them over the desk chair and tucked himself inside with Twinkies spread out like a moat around him.

"Want some, Lizzy?" He asked through a cream-smearred grin.

"No thanks, kiddo. I'm not really in the mood for sugar right now." Then I thought better of that. I grabbed my curling iron off the table and gave him a wicked grin. "I'll joust you for some, though."

"Give me one!" He said with a delighted squeal and pointed to the curling iron.

I went to the bathroom, secured mom's lance and tossed it across the room to him. "Nice catch," I said.

Danny didn't waste a split second. Leaving his castle and moat behind, he charged.

Intent on *not* letting him win too easily, I parried and dodged the next jab altogether. Hopefully, this wasn't too hard on the curling irons. *Oh well.*

We ended up in a tangle of blankets, rolling and laughing. Unfortunately, the Twinkies didn't fair too well, as most of the moat was now squished flat. On the TV, a news announcer caught my eye. He was standing in front of a river—no, a *street* filled with a river! I set my curling iron aside and stood to watch in front of the TV. Danny came over by my side, wide-eyed.

"Lots of water!" he exclaimed, putting his sticky hands on the screen. The news scene broke away and showed another with fire trucks roaring up a street.

I barely said, "That was our motel sign!" when the muted wail of a fire engine sounded. "There're going to the flood, and it's right up the road we're on."

Now, I have to admit, the next thing out of my mouth wasn't the brightest idea I'd ever had, and it only went downhill from there. "We need to see that!" I said, turning to gather up my socks and hightops. Danny applauded an enthusiastic agreement.

Dark clouds filled the sky, but it wasn't raining. I had one hand in Danny's and the other in my pocket, making sure I had remembered to bring the room key. The air wafting down the road smelled like the muddy outdoors. The sounds of the city gave way to a low roar, like the waterfalls back home in New York. Excitement started to tingle the pit of my stomach, and the long walk wasn't the only reason my heart pounded. Danny jumped up and down beside me at the first sight of the muddy barricade.

Water churned, the color of chocolate milk. It gushed down the street, colliding with the sand bags numerous men and women were trying to set right. Firefighters shouted orders and

waved their arms wildly to get each other's attention over the rush of the water. This was just about the best thing I'd ever seen; where cars should have been, there was a river!

Then, Danny climbed up on the sandbags. "Look, a real moat!" he yelled over his shoulder.

"Danny, no!" I screamed.

A firefighter nearby must have heard me. He took a leap for Danny.

Danny took a step back, seemingly startled by the fireman's sudden advance. And his foot floundered for a hold behind him. His arms flailed.

I jumped up on the barricade and had one hand on Danny's shirt when I felt the sand give way beneath me. The firefighter had managed to get a grasp on Danny's ankle. I saw him pull Danny forward even as the water reached up to meet me. I went in, backward, engulfed by the shocking cold of the water.

The torrent pulled me under. I felt the hard jolt of the road for a brief moment but was swept from it, not managing to get my legs to work right in time. When I righted myself enough to get my head above water, I couldn't see Danny anymore. The water traveled fast. People along the side pointed at me. The current carried me faster than I could counter and I went under again. Grit and slime and pounding water met me every time my mouth escaped the torrent. It was so cold.

My body moved with the speed of an Amtrack down the makeshift waterway. Ahead, a man was holding out a broom handle. I stretched out my arm, fingers desperately searching for the handle. I touched the broom, and it slipped right through my grasp. I went under again. My knees and butt and elbows scraped into the roadway as I jostled back and forth in the current. *I'm never going to see Mom again, I thought. Oh, she's going to be so mad.*

There was a bridge ahead with a tunnel where the water streamed under. *Am I out of the city?* Firefighters stood on the bridge. Lowering a hose parallel to the bridge, across its length, they dipped it into the water. I faced upward and managed to grab the hose under my arms. But when

the hose went taut, it drove me beneath the surface. Water rushed over me. I couldn't breathe. Panicking, I let go of the hose and found myself sucked out the backside of the tunnel.

The water had numbed me now. *Nothing's working*. I was going under longer and longer. The stream widened. The sun shown in the sky above—when I could see it past the thick water around me. It played over treetops and muck and cattails. *Cattails?* I let out a gasp of realization and grabbed for the cattails rushing by beside me. I gripped a bunch, allowing me to bring my knees up beneath me. And I stood. In about two feet of swiftly moving water. I pretty much just fell toward the bank of the stream and lay there, hoping someone would pull me up the rest of the way. Eventually, someone did.

Mom about had a fit. That is, after she hugged me so tight I felt like a couldn't breathe again. I was never so glad as to see Danny jumping around, acting like his usual crazy self, restrained by a firefighter, under the sign of our motel. *Welcome to Temple City*, I thought.