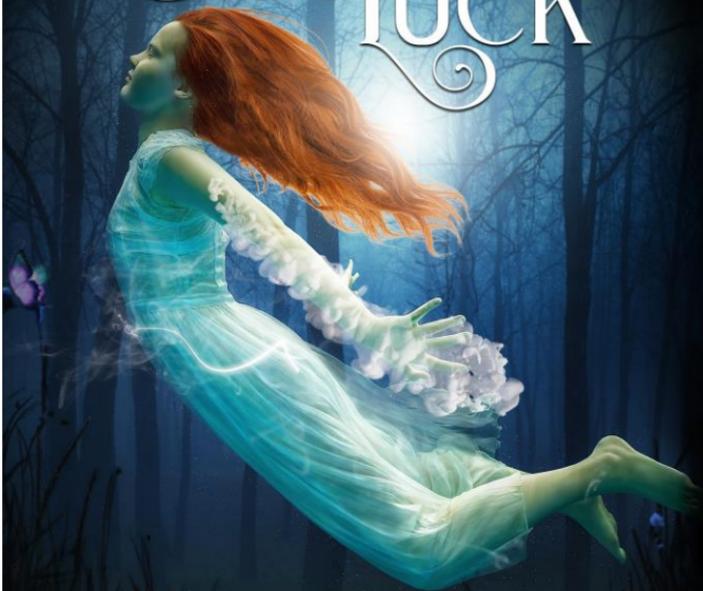


STRANGE A NOVEL LUCK



BOOK I

AMIE IRENE WINTERS



STRANGE

LUCK

A NOVEL

BOOK ONE IN THE
STRANGE LUCK SERIES

Chapter 1



Just as I thought I would die from boredom, a gloved hand opened the door.

He carried the scent of pine and rain with him. The wobbling box concealed everything except the top of his felt hat.

Awakened by the clanking, Merriweather perked up her orange and black spotted head but then plunked back down on her flannel bed with a huff and shut her eyes. She was getting old and gray and didn't greet customers the way she used to. Nevertheless, she was still the shop's mascot.

"Do you need a hand with that, sir?" asked my father from behind the counter, looking up from his

newspaper.

“That’s quite all right,” said a muffled voice. “I can handle it.” Shakily he placed the box brimming with oddities onto the counter with a deep grunt. “I hope you’re still open,” the man said. He moved out from behind the box, revealing a plump round face and red nose.

My father peered at the man over the top of his wire-rimmed glasses. “Yes. Just in time actually.”

I anxiously looked at the grandfather clock directly across from me. It was five minutes until closing, so this guy was certainly pushing it.

The man smiled, revealing yellow teeth. “Good, I have some treasures here that I think you’ll be quite interested in.”

My father dropped his newspaper and rubbed his calloused palms together in excitement. “Let’s have a look see then, shall we?”

He immediately started digging through the dusty box, pulling out different items and carefully lining them up on the counter as I watched unenthusiastically over his shoulder, hot chocolate in hand.

The first item was an 1880s walnut sewing box. Faded hand-painted flowers crept along the corners. The inside compartments were lined with weathered blue velvet. My father furrowed his brow, examining the mediocre condition of the heavy scissors, faded thread, and long metal tools inside.

“That was my great-grandmother Marie’s, and I don’t know how to sew so I don’t have much use for it,” the man in the hat said. “I thought it might be worth something since it’s so old.”

“I see.” My father shot the man a phony pleased look and set down the sewing box with a clunk.

I knew right away he would not be purchasing such a

thing for our shop. Oddities—strange, rare, and dark things, especially things claiming to be haunted—were the Darling family specialty and legacy. People came from all over to visit our little red shop that looked like a barn at the end of the dusty road in the mountains, and my father would certainly not disappoint them. And especially since *The Nomad* traveling series did a feature on our shop, we had more guests than ever hunting for strange items. But on most days—like this one—the shop was so quiet I could hear every gear turning in the grandfather clock, which was said to be possessed by the ghost of a murderous musician.

My father then pulled out a clock in the shape of a boot, with its gears peculiarly constructed on the outside. The gears and wheels all fit perfectly together, even given their unusual angles in the boot shape.

“Well, this is quite interesting.” My father’s tone was much more chipper.

The stranger’s face brightened. “Yes, that’s a German mantle clock. Beautiful item.”

My father turned and looked at me, giving me the look to do my job. I huffed with displeasure. The only thing I could think about was sitting at home listening to the rain while writing, not sifting through somebody’s old junk.

I plunked down my cup of hot chocolate and stepped towards the counter. “So...what’s the clock’s story?” I asked in a fake overly nice tone that only my father picked up on.

The man knew exactly what I was asking, and his response did not disappoint. “Well, it was allegedly made by a mad puppeteer in Germany and it is...haunted...to put it bluntly. I purchased it at a backstreet market years ago while visiting Berlin. It’s brought me *strange luck*, which is why I thought it would be perfect for your shop

given that it has the same name.”

My father took a heavy, wheezing breath and crumpled his white walrus mustache, which was beginning to yellow. It’s what he always did when he got excited about a new oddity to add to the shop. “I like the sound of that,” he snorted. “Tell us more. This is the best part of the job.”

The man grinned. “Well, as soon as I brought it home, bizarre things started happening, like phantom smells of apple pie and cinnamon in the living room. I haven’t cooked a day in my life, being a bachelor and all. Sometimes the clock would mysteriously vanish and end up in the garden or in a cupboard. That’s why it’s a little bit banged up in places,” he chuckled, “or has dirt in her gears.” The man gulped, looking nervously side to side. “Also, I won the lottery the day I purchased the clock.”

My father and I looked inquisitively at each other.

“But I seemed to have lost the entire fortune in less than a week. It’s quite a complicated ordeal—their registry misspelled my name at first, then the funds went missing, then arrived, then there was the robbery, then the money showed up, then disappeared. See what I mean? Strange luck! Frankly, I don’t have the energy to keep digging the thing out of the garden or getting it down from the top of my cupboards.”

“Hmm, a shoe clock that can make it smell like homemade apple pie and makes you win the lottery—sounds pretty incredible to me,” I said.

“Do you know the name of the mad puppeteer who made it?” my father inquired.

The man’s eyes brightened. “It was Herr Hans Klein, I believe. He made all sorts of automatons and eccentric clocks in Germany.”

“Ah! We are quite familiar with Hans,” I said. “We’ve only had the privilege of purchasing one of his clocks

before—a wooden owl clock that hooted. The owners who sold it to us claimed it rarely hooted, unlike a regular cuckoo clock, but when it did, it would rain. I sort of miss that owl now.”

I grabbed the shoe clock from my father, running my fingers over the expertly crafted metal gears and wheels. I even went in for a sniff but was disappointed when I didn’t detect any hints of apple and cinnamon. Discreetly I nodded to my father, indicating we should purchase the item.

My father furrowed his mustache again. “We’ll give you a good price for it. It should fit nicely with the rest of our items here, as you can see.” My father’s arm stretched along the glass counter, which held such showpiece oddities as a dental phantom mask and a taxidermied haunted armadillo. He coughed hard into his palm before grabbing for more items from the box.

The man smiled with a slight nod.

“Daisy, go and write this nice man up his receipt and record the sale in the ledger, and I’ll look through the rest,” my father instructed.

But when I saw that the next item in the box was a *Conus Gloriamaris* shell, I procrastinated. Even though I disliked working at my family’s antique shop, I did enjoy the highly strange and rare items like this that passed through.

“Your *Conus Gloriamaris* is wonderful, and it’s in great condition,” I said. “From the unique white markings on the spine, this must be a Tell Shell, correct?”

The man nodded.

“Then may I have a closer look?”

I could tell by my father’s befuddled expression that he had no idea what the item was. A part of me secretly delighted in knowing about certain items that he didn’t after he had spent thirty years working as an antique

dealer.

I wiped a good half inch of dust off the glass display case and came in for a closer look. Quietly, I examined the gold and black markings. “Where did you acquire such a thing? They were very scarce at one point. There’s a legend that a collector purchased one at auction in 1792 only to destroy it to maintain the value of one already in his collection. They aren’t as rare these days, but the fact that it’s a Tell Shell increases its value.”

“I actually inherited it. To be honest with you, it already told me my fortune and I no longer have a use for it.” The man turned red. “It said I would meet my wife in Mexico. That’s where I’m headed next week.”

I smirked. “You’re right. The legend says these rare shells will only reveal your fortune once if you hold your ear up to the opening on your birthday.”

“So what do you think?” he asked.

“Well, I can tell you this, sir. This type of item only comes along once in a blue moon. We’d be fools not to take it.”

My father eyed me. “Daisy!” he burst out authoritatively. He absolutely hated that I knew more about an item than he did, even though it contradicted his intent to have me take over the shop from him on Sunday. “Let me worry about that, you need to learn the books, now go!”

The man in the hat shot me a pursed grin as if uncertain whether he should remain quiet.

My father still had a tendency to treat me like a child, but I didn’t feel like arguing today. “All right, all right, I’m going.”

I slowly sauntered into the back room, grabbing the massive ledger book that nearly crushed me every time I grabbed it from the shelf. We did everything by longhand at Strange Luck, and as I wrote down the information, I

couldn't stop thinking about how I would be taking over this place. Didn't he know I had dreams and aspirations to be a writer and travel the world? Didn't he know I didn't want to be stuck behind the counter all day in this crummy shop in Sea Salt? Besides, the job was incredibly boring, as it was mostly waiting, and I was never one to believe anything in our shop was actually haunted. But Strange Luck had been in our family for generations and with my father's ailing health, I didn't have a choice not to take over the family business.

My father shouted back to me. "Daisy, we'll take the *Conscience Glorum* as well."

I giggled. "*Conus Gloriamaris*, Dad," I yelled.

"Whatever! Just write it up."

The front door jingled, and I poked my head out to see my best friend Roger enter the shop. He quickly removed his hat and smoothed his hair at the part.

"Good evening, Wallace. Is Daisy around?" he asked.

My father, too preoccupied examining the Tell Shell, gestured with his head.

"Roger, I'm back here," I shouted.

Roger knew the shop well and often came around to have lunch with me or cover my shift in an emergency. He maneuvered behind the counter and into the back room.

"Dare I ask how it's going?"

I huffed.

"Still upset about taking over the shop? What is it now, one day?"

I sighed. "Yeah, just what I always wanted for my eighteenth birthday, especially since I received this today." I pulled the wrinkled letter out of my purse and handed it to Roger, catching a glimpse of my tired blue eyes in the reflection of a nearby antique vase that supposedly attracted butterflies.

“What’s this?” He smoothed his dark brown hair again before opening the letter. His hazel eyes moved swiftly, and then he finally said, “Daisy, this is great! They accepted you into the writing program in London. That’s what you’ve always wanted!”

I shot him a pronounced frown.

He said, “But what about the shop...and your dad?” He looked over at me and saw the disappointed look on my face.

“I know. My dream school accepted me. I could be a writer and finish my novel. I could travel the world—but I can’t leave because of this stupid place.” Like a child, I kicked the desk leg, and it moved with a loud screech.

He lowered his voice. “Does your father know?”

“No way! It would only upset him, and his heart is already so weak. The doctors said if he doesn’t get the heart operation, it’ll be too late. Besides, I already tried talking to my distant cousins about it—the next heirs of the shop—and they said I must fulfill my duty as a Darling. Supposedly each Darling must run the shop for at least five years for all duties to be equal and to keep the shop in the family. Since my mom left me and my dad, that’s everybody. I don’t see how I can possibly go to school in London and write while having to work here day and night and take care of my sick father. There’s just no way.”

Roger’s hazel eyes sank. He handed back the acceptance letter. “Sorry about that, but maybe things will work out. Maybe you’ll start liking the antique trade more, and you can write and travel when you’re older.” He took a few steps, examining the wall covered in knickknacks, doll heads, medicine bottles, old tools, and dusty leather books. “I mean, this place is pretty neat if you think about it—all history. You’d have a lot of stories to tell. I just saw a Tell Shell out there. You have

to admit that's pretty cool."

"Aside from the Tell Shell, most of it is just a bunch of garbage with a gimmick." I huffed, knowing I had to stuff down my emotions again. Life just wasn't fair sometimes!

"You're wrong, Daisy. You've got things owned by kings and queens, poets, writers, doctors. Even though I'm here all the time, I never get tired of discovering new treasures."

"Then maybe you should take over the shop," I snapped.

He shot me a disgruntled look and took a step towards me, looking paler than ever. "Look, I know you're in a bad mood, so let me take you out to dinner tonight. You pick the place. And I'll make sure to get you a nice piece of chocolate cake, too. How does that sound?"

I set my pen down on the ledger. Roger was my best friend and always seemed to know just what to say and do to get me out of a rut. I fought to hide my smile, but when he gave me that affable look of his, my smile quickly broke through my stone-faced expression.

"Well, how can I say no to that? Let me just finish this up and then we'll go. Okay?"

Roger's thin lips formed a smile. Immediately, he started looking at the "limbo items" on the shelf. The items were supposed to be tagged and priced within a week and set out in the shop, but some of the items were pushing two months because we were so backlogged. My father's rule of thumb was that if there was too good of an opportunity for an oddity, don't pass it up.

Roger perused the antique bookshelf before heading over to the vintage games, probably in search of an old chess board to add to his collection. When I finished filling out the ledger, Roger was quietly looking at the top

shelf.

“Ready,” I said.

“Wait a minute. I’ve always wanted to ask you about that strange letter up there.” Roger pointed to the yellowed, barely legible letter resting on the top shelf. “But I always get distracted from all of the amazing items in limbo.”

I rolled my eyes. “That letter only adds to my frustration with this place!”

“Oh, you have me curious now. Can I see it?”

“I guess.” I pulled my thick red hair into a ponytail, positioned myself on the old rickety chair, and then grabbed the letter from the top shelf. I blew off a coating of dust. “It’s been here for a hundred years, so be careful with it.”

He anxiously snapped it away from me, about to tear open the sealed flap.

“Wait!” I shouted, nearly losing my balance. “Don’t open it! Are you crazy?”

I jumped off the chair and moved to look out at my father, hoping he hadn’t heard the commotion. Luckily he was still conversing with the man in the hat.

“It’s been sealed this entire time?” Roger lowered his voice. He ran his fingers along the seam to confirm. “Now I really want to open it!”

“Yes,” I whispered, snatching it from his grubby hands. “If my father sees us with this, we’re dead.”

“I don’t get it. What’s the big deal about this letter anyway?”

I looked out again to make sure my father was still distracted. “Well,” I whispered, “if you must know, this letter was delivered to the shop a hundred years ago from Eureka, California. See, it’s addressed to a Mr. Farnsworth.” The elegant cursive print was faded as was the stamp of a cowboy panning for gold.

“Who’s Farnsworth?”

“We don’t know to this day. But my grandfather was insistent on not opening the letter as it was not intended for anyone’s eyes except Farnsworth’s. It arrived the first day the shop opened. He thought perhaps this was addressed to the building’s previous tenant and one day Farnsworth would show up and collect the letter, but he never has. So my grandfather instructed my father to keep the letter and preserve it if its rightful owner ever came.”

“But what was in this building previously?” Roger asked.

“That’s one of the strange things about it. It was a barn attached to a house built by an old man who lived and died there, but his name wasn’t Farnsworth. The house has since been demolished. My grandfather inquired around town and searched the papers and library records for Farnsworth but found nothing. It was like he never existed. My father thinks it might be from a ghost or haunted in some sense.”

“Hey, I’m one to believe in strange things, but that’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. Besides, if the letter is that old, wouldn’t Farnsworth most likely be dead by now?”

I nodded.

“And what if the letter is terribly important and requires action? Shouldn’t we open it?”

“No! My father is insistent that I retain the letter when the shop is officially mine. He said it’s about ‘doing what’s right.’ In fact, the piece *The Nomad* wrote about our shop briefly touched on the legend of the letter. Now that Farnsworth’s name is published in a major book, maybe he’ll come and claim the letter, or maybe his next of kin. Anyway, one time I almost opened it, and I never heard the end of it. My father is a gentle man, but it was

the first and only time I was ever actually scared of him.”

Roger looked at the letter in deep contemplation. “Well, I guess it’s a nice thought that your grandfather and father want to do the right thing.”

I shrugged. “I think it’s nonsense, just like everything else in the shop, and I have absolutely no interest in opening it and further tying myself to this stupid place.”

We both stared at the letter in silence.

Then Roger smirked, “So, when are you going to open it?”

“Roger!”

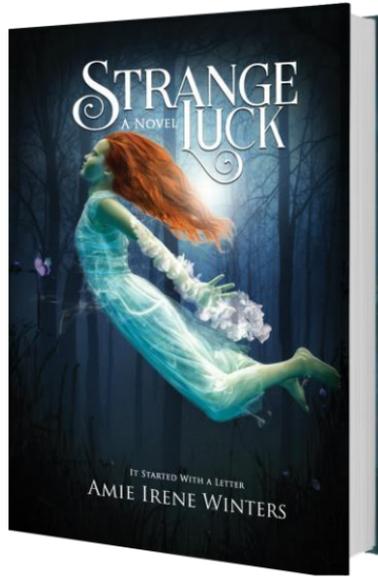
He grinned.

“Now the whole world knows about the letter, and it would kill my father if he knew I opened it.” My fingers tingled slightly, as they always did as I held it. I desperately wanted to tear open the envelope whenever I was alone in the shop. Of course, I would never tell another soul about my desire—it was that stubborn gene that all Darling women and men possessed. I had convinced myself long ago that if I pushed down my desire far enough it would eventually go away.

“He doesn’t have to know, you know,” Roger taunted, further weakening me.

I stared at the familiar cursive writing and cowboy stamp. The tingling intensified. Since I was a little girl, I had conjured up ideas of what could be inside the envelope—a treasure map, a lost love letter from a famous poet, the deed to valuable land, an important part of history—only adding to my torture of not being able to open it. But for some reason, the letter felt extremely urgent today.

It felt heavy and electric, like it would burst on its own, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to hold out much longer.



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