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MY NAME IS LOLA
by Lola Rozsa,
as told to and written by Susie Sparks

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CHAPTER TWELVE

The New Frontier

… and here *I* was thinking he was just going to tell me we'd have to stay a little longer … maybe until next fall. I never expected *this* bombshell!

"You want to leave the company? You want to leave Shell, but you want to stay in *Canada*?" Ted was talking fast and I was trying to stay composed enough to decipher what it was he was trying to tell me. "You're saying you want to leave Shell, start your own seismic company, and then contract your services *back* to Shell?"

I kept looking through the frost on the window as we sat together at the kitchen table, his voice now drowned out by the noise in my head. What in the world was he thinking? Didn't he know how lucky we were? He had a secure job with a great future. If he wanted to start his own company, why wouldn't we just go back to Texas to do that? And how could he start his own company anyhow? Even I knew how expensive a proposition *that* would be. And even if he could, who would he hire? Everybody he knew was tied up with the big oil companies. This was crazy!

Maybe if I was perfectly calm I could get through to him. "Won't Shell want this house back if you leave the company?"

"Yes."

I thought so. Not only would we be penniless, we'd be sleeping on the street. I glanced at the thermometer hanging outside on the

window frame; if I was reading it correctly through the frost, it was 35 below.

It was like *I* was the one teetering on the top of the building threatening to jump and *Ted* was the rational one trying to talk me down. Very slowly he started listing off the steps it would take. We could cash in his Shell pension for the down payment on a house. He could put the house up as collateral on a business loan to finance the new company, and then buy whatever equipment he couldn't lease. And there were plenty of new graduates who'd taken advantage of free tuitions after they'd come back from the war; he could start recruiting geologists and geophysicists straight out of university. Exploration was going full bore in Alberta. All the big companies needed all the seismic data they could possibly assemble. The work he had done in the months since we'd arrived in Calgary gave him the first look at the potential that was out there – and that potential was virtually limitless. Being a part of this boom was giving him far greater experience and education than he would ever get by going back to Texas. Yes, this would be a risk, but it was a calculated risk. The worst that could happen was that it wouldn't work. If that happened he could always get another job.

I glanced again at the thermometer. It read 37 below.

January, 1950, is still the only January in recorded history that never had a single Chinook. I honestly don't remember what I did after listening to Ted's plans; I suspect I took to my bed. I'd like to think it was just to get warm, but most likely I headed there for a good cry.

In all our years together, I'd never once dug in my heels about a move, but this time we'd been *promised* that we'd get to go home after a year. This time, however, Ted didn't even want to wait until the year was up. He not only wanted to jump ship, he wanted to stay in this god-forsaken deep freeze and risk everything we had on a gamble that he could go it alone.

I guess I had to decide whether *I* could do it. It would mean far fewer chances to see my family back in Texas. We'd have to live on

pretty slim pickin's; there'd be no money to spend on vacations back home to Texas. Would we lose contact with all our Shell friends? We'd have to move away from our wonderful neighbours on 8A Street. Would we even be able to find a house we could afford? All that new construction we'd seen in the spring had frozen to a complete stop, but that hadn't meant that the planes full of incoming Americans had. Ruthie would have to change schools … again. And, let's face it, if he had to hire new graduates, we'd be right back to where we'd been ten years before. Ted would be spending the bulk of his time on a seismic crew again – at least until he got the new guys up to speed. I'd be a single parent with two small children isolated on the back of beyond.

I don't want to imply that Ted had made this a unilateral decision. He wanted me to sign on because he saw this as a joint effort between the two of us. And I knew he believed that's what it was; this was *our* decision. But that didn't make it any easier.

It would be nice to think I pulled myself together with a whither-thou-goest-I-will-go speech, but I doubt I was that selfless through that frigid, soul-destroying January. This was something Ted really wanted to do and, when push came to shove, I guess I knew he could. Count me in.

And no, it definitely wasn't that easy. What you have to remember is that people simply didn't jump from one job to another in those days. We had all come through the Depression, then through the war years into a very uncertain economy. If you were lucky enough to have a good job, you stayed there until you got your gold watch forty years later. You wonder why the '50s was such a conservative decade? Everyone had had their fill of uncertainty over the previous twenty years; all anyone wanted was a little peace and quiet.

Well, everyone but the Rozsas, I guess.

The bulk of Canadian oil and gas sits in the Western Canadian Sedimentary Basin, which stretches from southwestern Manitoba to northeastern British Columbia, and it covers most of Alberta. This wasn't news in 1950. Everyone knew about the big natural gas finds

around Medicine Hat as early as 1890 and, in 1912, Eugene Coste had built the first important gas pipeline from Bow Island to consumers in Calgary. After Leduc, though, everyone in the petroleum world knew that Alberta's future would be all about oil.

Ted knew very well where the oil was; his job would be to prove that to clients he had yet to acquire.

He wasn't the first geophysicist in Calgary to reach a similar decision, however. John Galloway, who had been with Standard Oil, was transferred to Calgary from California in 1938 to open a local office. Five years later, he, too, resigned to start his own petroleum consulting firm. Others followed and in April, the month we arrived in Calgary, John assembled eleven others like him to talk about forming a Calgary chapter of the Society of Exploration Geophysicists. In June, fifty additional people gathered at the Palliser Hotel for an inaugural meeting where the Canadian Society of Exploration Geophysicists was born, and Ted paid his two-dollar membership fee.

I've learned over my many years that the only way to heal any loss, whether it's the death of a loved one or simply a disappointment, is to put your feet on the floor every morning and get to work. And half the work is just getting your feet on the floor.

Once I'd done that, the rest came along just as Ted had outlined it for me.

Well, sort of. By June he had his ducks in a row and was ready to announce his intentions to Shell, but they were so busy they begged him to start work immediately. They would sign the contract if he would stay on for another few months as a consultant. Nowadays, I'm told that if an exploration employee resigns, he or she is ushered out the door with a security guard to ensure no maps or confidential documents leave the premises. In those days, though, a man's handshake was his word, and, in Calgary's business community, a man's character defined whether or not he could be trusted. In Ted's case, he continued to work for Shell from June through November until finally he withdrew his pension and struck out on his own.

He named his new company Frontier Geophysical.

I found us a little house way out on the far western outskirts of Calgary in a brand new development that would come to be known as Marda Loop. Beyond us was nothing but prairie, foothills, and the Rocky Mountains, but Richmond Elementary School was close by and that was the only essential requirement. The house wasn't nearly as nice as the one we'd had to give back to Shell, but we had certainly lived in far worse. It would be fine.

That miserable first winter was finally over. Ted set up his first office at the house wearing the three hats of land man, geologist, and geophysicist. He had worked for Shell for fourteen years, and they knew what he could do. He was smart, honest, he knew the lay of the land in Alberta, and they knew he could be counted on. Shell agreed to be Frontier's first client.

In fact, within very short order he got a phone call from Joe Little, who was working for Shell, suggesting that if he was looking for a field crew, he had the perfect guy. His name was Sandy McDonald. He had a degree in engineering physics and wartime experience in artillery. He knew everything there was to know about explosives along with a healthy respect for them and was now interested in getting into seismic work. By the end of that week, Sandy and Ted were in our driveway building Frontier's first dog house, with little Sidney handing them tools as ordered.

The dog house is designed to hold the geophysical recording instruments and it's mounted on a truck. And once the ink was dry on the contract with Shell, they could buy a shooting truck and a water truck besides.

Ted found his crew of interpreters just as he'd predicted. He had been working at Shell with Wilf Baillie since our days in Jackson, Mississippi, and at his suggestion he hired Wilf's brother Dick to join Sandy on the crew. And over the next few months they brought on Ed Rutledge, Gerry Sykes, Ted Pattinson, and Bob James to complete their crew. Two years later, Wilf joined them as a partial owner.

Armed with a folding table and two chairs, Ted moved into two bare rooms he'd found in the back of the Uptown Theatre on 8th Avenue. For a while, when I could find a sitter for the kids, I'd go down there to woman the phone and keep some order, but very quickly Frontier got so busy they needed full-time office staff.

However, we still weren't eating very high off the hog. It was hot dogs and beans and peanut butter sandwiches for me and the kids, but it was definitely worse for Ted. He took his first crew north to the Peace River and Grande Prairie and worked very long hours. Money was so tight in the beginning that the crews had to use hand augers to drill the shot holes, but that first winter when the ground was as hard as cement, Sandy told me they'd just drop in a little dynamite and blast them open.

Then, quite quickly, it all began to pay off. Within a year Frontier grew to five crews.

Dick Baillie always said it was a dream job for a young guy trying to get a foothold on a career. He told me that since they did all the interpretation out in the field, he had a chance to learn everything from the guys who were basically pioneering the industry in Alberta. "Ted hired me as a computer, and then I was a surveyor, then party manager and, within a year and a half, I was party chief. Every time I got moved up a notch in the company I got a pay raise, so it was a pretty heady time. There was just so much opportunity out there!" Indeed, by the mid-'50s, there were about 175 crews operating in western Canada.

I had a hard time understanding why these big companies wouldn't just grow their own seismic operations in house, but Ted explained that the corporations were so hogtied by corporate regulations and policies that if ever they had to lay off a jug hustler for any non-performance issues, it would end up costing them far more than the employee was ever worth. On the other hand, if the employee belonged to the contractor, then it was up to the contractor to deal with the issues. And the contractor, if he was smart, made sure he didn't hire anyone who couldn't, or wouldn't, carry his weight.

The guys Ted hired were outstanding and we saw a lot of them socially as well as on the job. It felt very much like being back on those dusty, isolated plays back in Texas and Oklahoma with our big seismic crew family. They knew we had lived the life, so we understood what they were going through when they had to be away from their wives and girlfriends for weeks and months at a time. And we understood, probably better than most of the big corporate employers, how important it was to take care of those crews out on the job.

In the summer, the crew worked on jobs out on the plains, but in the winter they moved north near High Prairie close to the Swan Hills field. Ted bought the first half dozen trailers that ATCO produced for one of his very first camps. The trailers were on wheels, rather than skids, they were about twenty-five feet long and most had double-decker bunks as well as living space. That first winter, it went to 50 below, so the crew was pretty grateful for shelter. But in the beginning, the trailers only had little Duotherm heaters, so the guys on the top bunks nearly suffocated from the heat, while those on the bottom about perished from the cold. However, there was also an office trailer, a kitchen trailer, and a utility trailer with washrooms. Unquestionably, it was the utility trailer that was most appreciated; until that time, all the field crews, no matter who their employers were, had had to use outhouses. I take that back; it was actually the cook that was most appreciated. Everybody took *very* good care of the cook.

Dick Baillie used to say it might have been pretty chilly on those bottom bunks, but it was a far sight better than being outside trying to get the wheels on the trucks to turn. At 50 below, the rear differentials would freeze solid. "We'd drag trucks all over the compound trying to get the wheels to turn over because the grease in there was so stiff that the tires would just skid around on the snow before they warmed up enough to actually turn."

Ted, though, seemed to love being out there. He'd happily ensconce himself in one of the two rooms of the office trailer and work away on the interpretations late into the night. Dick said that one

miserably cold night he and Sandy were in the other room trying to stay warm and they began hearing some strange noise they couldn't quite identify. Maybe, they thought, it's the almost musical sound they say you can sometimes hear with the northern lights. They stuck their heads out the trailer door, but no, the sound was coming from the other office. Dick said they pressed their ears to the wall and, sure enough, it was Ted contentedly singing to himself. He still chuckles remembering that time. "It was just so out of character for Ted," laughed Dick. "He was a great guy and he was extremely intelligent, but he was always so very reserved with people. This was an entirely new Ted!"

The kids on the crews were mostly young guys straight from the war or right off the family farm back in Saskatchewan or rural Alberta. They'd had no education in seismology, of course, so Ted and Wilf wrote a little textbook in order to help everyone understand how their on-the-job training actually related to the science of the discipline.

Hearing their stories now, I'm sure most people would cast a dubious eye at any of those jug hustler tales from the '50s. I wasn't actually there, of course, but I certainly heard enough to know they were real. Ted set the pace and everyone worked very hard, long hours. But when they had a chance, they played hard too. They were expected to actually record a certain number of hours every month, but those hours didn't include the time it took to service the equipment or even the time they had to stand down because of inclement weather. So, if they *did* get time off, they were ready to drink beer in whatever small town was closest to the site.

The bars opened at 11 o'clock in the morning and shut down for an hour at suppertime. Evidently, it was the courteous thing to do in the saloon culture to leave the crew's beer untouched on the table until the required hour was up, so they could resume drinking until closing time at 11 at night. In those days, beer parlours were segregated. Women without escorts were excluded, so these places definitely weren't meant for social drinking. There are veterans of

some of those early seismic companies still bragging about staying awake and drinking beer through three straight days off, and then going back to work on the fourth, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

By the end of 1952, Frontier was well-established, and we had assembled seven outstanding crews plus two slim-hole rigs simply because word spread that it was a company well-regarded in the industry that treated its employees fairly. Ted never had to recruit new people; they came to him. Jean Donnelly, who replaced me in the office, stayed with the company for years and made sure everyone was supportive of all the people who worked there *and* in the field. My kids still talk about going down to the office with Ted, knowing where Jean kept the candy jar, and being genuinely welcomed by everyone. It really was a family, complete with company picnics every summer on the banks of the Elbow River.

And speaking of family, before too long there was enough money for me to take the kids back to Texas to visit all my brothers and sisters. In those days, boarding a flight was a dress-up occasion even though we had fly the milk run from Calgary to Lethbridge, to Cut Bank, to Great Falls, to Billings, to Sheridan, to Casper, to Denver, then finally transfer to an American flight into Dallas. That Calgary to Dallas flight was always packed with kids, most of them throwing up with every bumpy descent along the way, so by the time we at last made it to Denton, I'm afraid those dress-up clothes were more than a little the worse for wear.

My brother Charlie was a teacher, so he invited nine-year-old Ruthie to visit his class. He took her by the hand and introduced her to the children saying that she could tell them all about what it was like to live in Canada. She promptly launched into a lecture about living in an igloo and riding the dog sled to school. Evidently, though, she was an equal-opportunity prevaricator because her teacher told me that when she got back to Calgary and was invited to tell her classmates about her trip to Texas, she told them we were attacked by Indians and had to retreat to the fort for protection.

Things were going so well out in the field that I could afford a sitter occasionally, and I had a chance to get more involved with the American Woman's Club. It had actually started back in 1912 as a social club to encourage philanthropic and civic improvement activities, and it even had its own clubhouse on 14th Avenue and 10th Street. As you can well imagine, it got its second wind in 1949.

Between 1950 and 1960, it's estimated that 30,000 Americans arrived in Calgary and made it home. It wouldn't surprise me if 15,000 of them actually added their names to the membership list. We collected all our Southern recipes and published a cookbook to raise money for local charities and produced talent shows to take to the old folks' homes, and had bridge parties and book discussion groups and dances to entertain ourselves. We were a tenacious lot; the club wasn't finally dissolved until 2007.

Ted was even able to carve out a little time for recreation. He played in the Oilmen's Golf Tournament at the Banff Springs in 1951 but realized he'd only had that opportunity because he happened to be in town when the notice went out to all the big oil companies. The guys out in the field missed their chance since, by the time they heard about it, the draw was filled. Ted felt badly about that and started lobbying for a way to let them get involved too.

The next summer, he joined the Earl Grey Golf Club and played as often as he could, and he bought us tickets to the Calgary Symphony. The orchestra in those days was composed of enthusiastic amateurs playing to a small audience of even more enthusiastic listeners who assembled faithfully for every concert in the Grand Theatre downtown. Ted was determined to support it and to help it grow, and he continued to study the music as they introduced it to him.

Calgary had very quickly transitioned from dusty cow town to big-city status. It was truly a metropolis on the move, so it's almost impossible to exaggerate the frantic pace of the early '50s. The planeloads of Americans kept coming. As fast as you could say suburbia, the builders slapped up subdivisions of little houses made of

ticky-tacky, and the city just kept mushrooming. Grace Presbyterian Church reported that the membership and the annual giving both doubled in the first half of that decade. Frontier Geophysical was thriving right along with Alberta's burgeoning economy. We barely had time to look around and smell the roses.