



2010 SHORT STORY FICTION WRITING CONTEST



# Lucky Day

BY Caryn L. Carson



## “Mr. Presley, this is your lucky day.”

Sean wanted to vault over the counter and kiss the cherubic gate agent as she tore up the coffee-stained boarding pass he had printed at the Hampton Inn that morning and handed him a crisp First Class boarding pass. Seat 4E — his favorite no less.

“Your Executive Platinum status can come in handy on flights like this. We oversold the coach section and we’ll need to move you up to First Class. Enjoy the complimentary upgrade and thank you for your loyalty, Mr. Presley. We’re boarding First Class in just a moment.”

As Sean wheeled his well-worn TravelPro through the anxious crowd of passengers toward the assembled group of obviously First Class passengers chomping at the bit to hurry down the jet bridge, his new favorite gate agent calmly uttered over the speakers the words that all were waiting to hear: “American Airlines Flight 1973 with service from Miami to Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport is ready to board at Gate D47. We invite our First Class cabin to board.”

Moments later, he was jockeying for overhead bin space with the woman in 3E and was able to slide in his TravelPro sideways. Just as he was easing into his seat and hoping for a vodka tonic before takeoff, a rotund dead ringer for Hoss Cartwright from *Bonanza* appeared in the aisle and then lifted his giant frame up and over Sean’s knees and collapsed into 4F.

“This upgrade may not have been such a lucky break,” Sean thought. All he wanted to do was rev up the Kindle sitting in his lap, sip vodka all the way back to Dallas, and try to put the humiliation of the day behind him. It had been another wasted Poor Man’s Flyback, as one of his law school buddies had coined the term years ago to describe the desperate trips one orchestrated to snag an interview with an out-of-town law firm on the guise that you just happened to be coming to town for a cousin’s wedding, or a family reunion, or some other fictitious event. Except this time, instead of being a 24-year-old 2L, Sean was a 15-year in-house real estate attorney who had been laid off four months earlier. He had two months of severance left and more than 2 million AAdvantage miles from working real estate deals in places like Scottsdale, Louisville, and Buffalo. He’d been using those AAdvantage miles to interview with any corporate law department where he could get his foot in the door.

“Well, are ya comin’ or goin’?” Hoss abruptly inquired.

“Um, I guess I’m going home to Dallas,” Sean stammered. He really did not know if he was coming or going since he’d been called into Human Resources at his old company, StreetKidz, that fateful Friday and so politely informed by “Eric,” the HR director, whose standard work attire consisted of jeans, Skechers, and one of his various colored StreetKidz hoodies, that his position was being eliminated.

“Well, then, I guess you are one lucky fella to call Texas home just like me. God bless us.”

Sean let the silence hang in the air. This was the tipping point when he either turned on the Kindle to signal he did not welcome conversation or volleyed at least one question back to Hoss to be cordial.

Too late. Hoss didn’t give him a chance to decide.

“J.W. Treecoat is my name. I’m in the chicken business. Chicken wings, actually. Would you believe my friends call me Hoss?”

Sean bit his lip to keep from smiling. He shook Hoss’ extended hand and felt Hoss’ thick fingers engulf his own slender digits. “Sean Presley. My friends call me Sean.”

“What do you do for a livin’, Mr. Sean Presley?”

As usual, this question hit him in the stomach. He considered spouting the “elevator speech” his outplacement coach had forced him to practice: *I’m a strategic business partner of large and small businesses who navigates the complex world of real estate transactions so those businesses can keep focused on doing what they do best while I vigorously protect their interests through every stage of the transaction.* But he had already used variations of that spiel in Denver twice that day in awkward informational inter-



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views and did not feel much like spitting it out again. “I am an attorney” was all Sean revealed.

“An attorney? Like Perry Mason?”

Sean considered for a moment the possibility of telling the truth about his prior real estate legal work for StreetKidz, the teens and tweens clothing retailer found in mid-range shopping malls in 19 states. But when most people found out where he worked, they were usually more interested in learning from him when the next Jeansapalooza Sale was going to take place. Were they interested in hearing about the tedium of retail space leases in shopping malls? Not so much. He slid the Kindle into the seat pocket in front of him, gathered his sincerity together, and replied, “Yes. Exactly like Perry Mason.”

By 3,200 feet, Hoss and Sean were enjoying cold cocktails and warm nuts distributed throughout the First Class cabin. Becky the flight attendant didn't blink when Sean asked her to refresh his vodka tonic a second time around. The memories of his botched interviews were fading away. As he regaled Hoss with stories about his fast-paced, but non-existent, trial practice, it felt great to be someone other than he was.

Hoss was obviously hanging on every one of Sean's words and waved off Becky when she tried to extend him a tiny steaming towel with her metal tongs. “Sean, tell me about the strangest case you ever had. I bet you've had some humdingers!”

Sean had accepted the hot towel from Becky and slowly wiped each finger with it to stall for time. He raised his eyebrows as if to look pensive when really he was running through episodes of *Boston Legal* in his mind. Could he pull off the episode where the lawyers represent a rancher and sue the FDA to stop the sale of cloned meat? Or what about the one with the woman who wants to sue the Catholic Church for not ordaining her as a priest? Surely after watching all five seasons of *Boston Legal* (not to mention all the DVD watching he had had time to do in the last few months during the daytime) there had to be something he could work with.

In the nick of time, there appeared the one thing that could divert Hoss' attention from the question still hanging in the air: Dinner. Becky slid a tray of teriyaki chicken with rice and a sad little salad over to Hoss' tray-table, and he immediately dug in. Sean watched out the corner of his eye as Hoss inhaled his food mouthful by mouthful. Sean wondered if he was even chewing. As he picked at his cheese ravioli in front of him, Sean thought back to his years at StreetKidz and pondered what, if he could

tell the truth, he could describe as one of his strangest projects. There was the time the COO of StreetKidz demanded he fly immediately to Memphis to demand rent concessions from a shopping center's management office less than a day after a shooting in the center's parking lot. Or the all-night negotiation of a master co-tenancy agreement with a family of outlet shopping malls on the West Coast. But would that be exciting enough to impress somebody on an airplane?

“It's really amazing what airlines are doing with Grade B chicken these days!” Hoss suddenly exclaimed as he clumsily wiped teriyaki sauce from the corners of his mouth with the back of his hand. “I should know. I've been in the chicken business for some time now. You probably wouldn't believe it, but the chicken wing component of the quick service and fast casual dining segment is getting ready to explode. Mark my words.”

Sean had experienced only once before this kind of excitement in something so mundane as chicken wings. It was when he was a young transactional associate at a big Dallas law firm and the CEO of StreetKidz, a firm client, was trying to convince him to jump ship and join the small legal team as the fledgling company's in-house real estate lawyer. But instead of chicken wings, the CEO was selling him on the promise that twelve- and thirteen-year-old kids would soon command an unprecedented share of the American household clothing budget. Sean was

skeptical then, but he indeed jumped ship six months later.

Becky cleared away both trays — one almost licked clean, one hardly touched. Hoss settled back in his seat and threaded his fingers across his portly waistline. “Finish your story about the craziest legal matter you ever handled.” Sean obliged, and as he began to weave a tale about representing the manufacturer of a prairie dog vacuum device in an FDA enforcement action — he actually knew a litigator who had handled precisely this case and he figured he could fake it — he could see Hoss' heavy eyelids begin to droop. Just as Sean began describing the contraption that harmlessly and painlessly sucked the prairie dogs from their holes, Hoss began snoring so loudly the woman in 3E leaned over the back of her seat to see what the commotion was. Hoss was out cold until the landing gear bumped along the runway at DFW.

As the airplane taxied to the gate, Sean slid his Kindle back into his briefcase and Hoss straightened his rumpled tie and wiped at some saliva that had drooled onto his ruddy cheek.

*Sean let the silence hang in the air. This was the tipping point when he either turned on the Kindle to signal he did not welcome conversation or volleyed at least one question back to Hoss to be cordial.*



"It was fine talking with you, Sean Presley. I forgot to ask you what you were doing in Miami, but I am sure you were working on the next big trial."

"Right, right." Sean sputtered. "That's the life of the litigator," he said more confidently and raised his fist in the air in a gesture of mock victory. The "fasten seatbelt" light went off, the chime dinged, and all the passengers popped up.

"Well, it all sounds very interesting. But what I really need is a whipsmart real estate lawyer. You would not believe how hard it is to find somebody who knows the difference between deferred rent and percentage rent. I'm looking for a lawyer who knows his way around operating covenants and can give a simple chicken man like me some advice about how to fix the biggest problem I have right now."

Sean felt a sharp stab in his chest and he began perspiring even as the plane's door was opened to the jet bridge and a rush of cold night air flooded the First Class cabin.

When Sean's now thick, furry tongue kept him from speaking, Hoss continued. "My stores are just little chicken wing shops in big shopping malls and strip centers. This recession is

killing foot traffic. Big anchor tenants are closing, and I'm left holding the bag."

Before Sean could swallow and utter the words "co-tenancy clause," Hoss pressed a business card into his hand. Sean pulled down his TravelPro from the overhead bin and shuffled towards the front of the plane as he read the card. "John Wallace Treecoat, President and CEO, Big Chick Chicken." Along the bottom of the card were little chicken footprints and the phrase "Bringing the Big Chick Experience to Over Fifty Outlets in Ten States!"

As Becky gently smiled and said "Buh-bye," Sean heard Hoss' voice from behind him. "If you know any ace real estate lawyers, give 'em my card!"



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