

# A LONG WAY HOME

Myra Hargrave McIlvain



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*Dedication*

TO STROUD

# Acknowledgements

The horror of 9/11 prompted me to begin this tale as a short story. It felt so raw that I put it away, but I did not forget the woman I named Meredith Haggerty and the forces that drove her. A few years ago, I heard a radio program on which postcards were read from people who shared their darkest secrets. One of those messages said, “Everyone thinks I died on 9/11.” Those chilling words shook me, and *A LONG WAY HOME* began to come alive.

I am proud of my granddaughter, artist and art teacher Lori Lockhart, who created the book cover, a collage portraying images from the story.

I owe special thanks to Barbara Wagner, my best buddy, who continues to read my book manuscripts with a careful eye to my many errors. She is a dear friend who sticks with me and claims to never tire of slogging through all the rewrites.

Novelcrafters is my critique group. Over the years, we have become friends—scrutinizing our manuscripts—pointing out what works and what misses the mark. We celebrate our successes and our failures. Of course, lots of laughter and a little wine makes it all better.

And finally, I offer enduring gratitude for my husband Stroud who never complains when I move into that other world of my imagination and tune out everyone and everything.

Also By Myra Hargrave McIlvain:

*Stein House*

*The Doctor's Wife*

*Waters Plantation*

*Texas Tales*

*Legacy*

*Shadows On The Land:*

*An Anthology of Texas Historical Marker Stories*

*Texas Auto Trails: The South and Rio Grande Valley*

*Texas Auto Trails: The Northeast*

*Texas Auto Trails: The Southeast*

*6 Central Texas Auto Tours*

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# Chapter One

Meredith jerked awake, sharply aware that the bus lumbered along a city street.

“Excuse me,” a man said. Lights reflected off his priest’s collar onto his face. “You were having a terrible dream. I probably made it worse by sitting here.”

Had she screamed? She had been dreaming of the man with the red tie hurtling toward the pavement. The thud, the hideous bursting of his body, had jolted her awake, rigid with terror. She forced a courteous smile, slipped fingers beneath the tortoise rim of her glasses, wiping tears, and scooted over to offer space for the priest. The chill of the metal strip under the window made her shudder. Her arm ached, felt as if it were stiffening; maybe the burns were weeping through the bandage. “Where are we?”

“Baltimore. This was the only empty seat. The buses headed south are all packed after the horror of the plane attacks.”

“Those poor people. I can’t imagine how they suffered.” She clenched her teeth, willing herself to the present, willing the tears to stop.

“I’m Jacques Richelieu.” Thin lips, spread into parenthesis smile lines, made his black eyes squeeze almost shut as he extended a packet of tissues. “I mostly go by Rich.”

*Rich? Not Father Richelieu?* She’d never talked to a priest, and as she accepted his kind offer of tissue, she began with a lie. “I’m Shannon Staples.” She liked the name—a good invention. It had popped into her head at the women’s shelter which she stumbled across before leaving the city. The clerk had asked for her name. When Meredith hesitated, the girl explained that the auxiliary ladies wanted to pray individually for all who came through the door. *Shannon* popped into her head. Then she noticed the box on the counter with *Staples* printed across its top.

“I’m headed back to Brownsville,” the priest said. “After all that’s happened, running a community center on the Texas border feels like a safe haven.”

“I’ll feel safer in Mexico.” *Why did I blurt that?*

“Mexico?” The priest asked. “Won’t you have trouble crossing? That’s why I’m on this god-awful bus. Planes are grounded. I doubt anyone can drive over the border for some time.”

God-awful? She’d heard that priests drank, but imagined them too pious to swear. “I may have to wait for a time in Brownsville.” Lies were coming easier. But controlling herself was not. “Sorry, I can’t stop the tears.” She dug for another tissue.

“Don’t apologize. Everybody on this bus is having trouble settling down. We all need a good cry.” His smile, flash-lit by a freeway power light, looked as much like an angel’s as Meredith could imagine.

“I can’t stop thinking about it.” That was the truth.

“We’re fortunate to be on this bus. Thousands are trapped in the city. Is someone expecting you in Mexico?”

“Yes, a teaching job.” *That lie came easy enough.* She tossed her glasses in her satchel, bunched her coat up against the window, and closed her eyes. Maybe he would get the message that she intended to sleep.



It had been less than twenty-four hours since she had arrived at her new office on the twenty-seventh floor. She wanted to get a head start on paperwork before her first oral progress report as the new director of international claims. After spending the weekend practicing her presentation, she felt ready, even excited. She had made herself indispensable to this multi-national corporation with her proficiency in German, French, and Spanish—languages absorbed as she and her mom followed her dad’s army career around the world. Work had become her life, and it was looking up. She removed the folder of reports, adjusted her new glasses, and began to read.

The blast hit outside her window like a sonic boom. Her corner of the building shook; the floor shuddered and began to tilt. She gripped her desk, disoriented. Her office door slammed against the wall as screams, like shrieks on a carnival ride, changed to guttural urgency. Ceiling tiles rained down in pieces, whiting her computer screen. Shelves buckled, slamming heavy files across her desk. She seemed to glide in slow motion as she grabbed for the tumbled mass of gold and orange mums—a gift from the staff in her old office. A shard of glass stabbed the photo of Harvey triumphantly waving his golf trophy over his head, as he sat in his wheelchair at his Westchester club. Water from the vase streaked his cocky grin.

“Could this be it? My chance?” The sound of her voice made her throat convulse. Her hands trembled. She drove her feet into her lunchtime jogging shoes, shoved her glasses into her mahogany leather satchel—her ticket to freedom. Pulling its strap over her head, she clutched its supple smoothness against her chest. Since the ’93 bombing, she had kept it with her—contoured to her body like a backpack even when she jogged—certain the time would come. Certain that she would see an opening into which she could vanish.

In the outer office, employees grabbed coats and bags as they fled their cubicles. A woman yelled from the windows at the far end of the room, “A body fell...it’s black all over.” People rushed to look.

“Get out! Everybody, get out!” The exploding voice of authority turned the crowd as smoothly as the deep bark of a sheepdog, herding them back toward the doors at the center of the building. “Take the stairs. The elevators aren’t working.”

“It had to be a bomb,” someone shouted. “Must have blown out a whole wall.”

Meredith had moved up to this floor in the tower just last week. She gazed into a sea of unfamiliar faces. They looked like a subway crowd—slightly jostled, close enough to smell the after-shave, the hair spray—locked together in a common link. Only this time, she wanted to touch someone, to know that they were in it together.

Even after the '93 bombing, she had felt safe here. The towers were so big, so solid. And the numbers added to her security—strangers that nodded at the same time each morning at the coffee shop, on the elevator, in the halls. It was a big impersonal sharing like her train ride into town—the same faces reading the *Times*, clutching the same worn briefcase, swinging the plastic bag with one apple and one banana—part of the unchanging landscape of her life.

The hand on her shoulder felt like a blessing. She turned to the familiar face of Pierre, the new transfer from their Paris office. His black beard looked peppered with ceiling dust. “Tie this piece of my t-shirt around your face. I wet it with my water bottle.”

She nodded, weak with relief at seeing someone she knew. She knotted the white mask. “Another bomb?”

He bowed his head as he punched in the numbers on his Nokia and held it close to his lips. “*Bien-aimée*, I can’t talk. Turn on the news. A bomb’s gone off upstairs. We’re getting out.” His voice softened, “*Je t’adore*.” He disconnected and stared at the phone like he could see her in the palm of his hand. Then he looked up. “Did you reach your husband?”

“My cell’s dead,” she lied. She had left it on her desk.

“Use mine.”

She hesitated, the trembling started again. “He’s playing golf.” She punched in the number, holding her breath, praying that he was on the course by now. When the machine clicked on, his charming public voice crooned his message of delight at hearing from her and wished she’d please leave a message. Callers never dreamed how much he hated to be bothered. “A cripple is reduced to limited pleasures,” he always said. “Talking on the phone is not one of them.”

She spoke to the recorder, only a few sentences about the evacuation. She could not utter, “I love you,” as Pierre had done. She had an obligation to Harvey. The love they shared, the delight in each other’s company disappeared after the crash. It was her fault he had lost the use of his legs, and she had faithfully paid her debt.

Inching closer to the door, she could see thick white smoke billowing down the stairwell, a roiling, stinking fog spreading over them. The coughing started and grew more intense.

A giant woman who was head of accounting stopped suddenly. “I’m not walking into all that smoke. It’ll set off my asthma.”

“It’s the only way out.”

“Well, I’m not going.” She turned, began pushing back through the crowd.

“I’m not going either.” Several people fell in behind, letting the big woman

serve as a battering ram.

“Think I’ll wait,” Pierre called over his shoulder. “Let the crowd thin out.”

“Are you sure?” Meredith wanted to beg him to stay with her. Of course, it was better this way. If it worked out that she could vanish, be lost in this massive explosion, it wouldn’t work for Pierre to tell the authorities that she escaped safely with him. She had waited for a chance all these years. Time would tell if this was it.



Their whole world changed New Year’s Eve 1991. She and Harvey had been to a party and had too much to drink. He was past being able to drive.

“I’m getting you buckled in, sweetheart. Have a little nappy, and don’t get sick on me.” She felt confident, fully in charge, even tucked a blanket around him before she pulled away from the curb.

He had passed out immediately, and the last thing Meredith remembered was how sleepy she felt. She tried chewing gum. Then it happened. She drifted off the parkway and hit a tree on the passenger side, Harvey’s side. How many times had she wished it had been her legs? How many times had he reminded her that it should have been her legs?



The chatter subsided as they began moving slowly down the stairs. Were they all as frightened as she was? Were their hearts pounding? They looked calm—helping each other. No one pushed.

The man in front of her grabbed a fire extinguisher. “May come in handy,” he said to no one in particular.

“You hear about the ceiling collapsing in the men’s room? Whole place was one big inferno,” the man behind her said.

No one responded.

The coughing grew worse—hacking and then wheezing—as they moved deeper into the pungent, penetrating cloud. She heard gentle offers to tear up clothing for masks.

At Harvey’s insistence, she had taken out two huge life insurance policies to care for him if she died first. Maybe this was it. He could collect. Maybe then he could forgive her. She never touched another drink, and she took care of him each evening as he drank himself into a stupor. She put out his cigarettes. And she usually stayed far enough away that his fist or his cigarette could not reach her. Weather permitting, he drove his cart every day to the golf course, stood long enough to make his shots, and then came home to nurse his bottle. In bad weather, he watched the golf channel and drank beer.

She tied Pierre’s t-shirt mask tighter, breathed in the calming maleness of his after-shave.

After the ’93 bomb, she began fantasizing her escape—an opportunity to

slip away and let Harvey be the very rich widower. At every opportunity, she stuffed hundred-dollar bills through the slit in the lining of her satchel and covered the bottom in a Ziploc bag holding an envelope of color and scissors to convert her sandy, shoulder-length hair into a curly brown boy-cut. She kept track of bus schedules out of the city.

“We have an injured woman. Please let us pass.” Two men eased down the stairs, carrying a body whose raw flesh gaped between patches of her clothing. Her breath hissed through slightly parted lips, eyes a dull stare, hair completely gone.

As a path opened, the men kept repeating. “Don’t know what happened. An explosion. So many didn’t make it. Flames shooting out of doorways.” They kept repeating the same thing as they disappeared down the smoky stairs.

“My God,” the man’s voice broke in a whisper close to her ear.

“Mmhuh.” She kept her lips sealed to keep from screaming.

The steady human descent was cradled in murmurs of support, those expressing fatigue being encouraged, helped along. Voices stayed low—an occasional whimper followed by deep-throated sounds of assurance.

She wanted to cover her ears, shut out the sound of creaking steel girders whining, taunting with the threat of snapping, dropping them through floors of rubble.

A cell phone squealed, and a woman called out, “My husband says we’ve been hit by a small plane.”

“Lucky it was small,” the man behind her quipped. “If it’d been large, we might have had some damage.”

Meredith joined in the burst of gallows laughter—too loud and too forced—but it relieved the tension. She should thank the guy, but if she turned, looked into his face, she’d cry.

As they stepped down, a few people seemed compelled to speak—overwhelmed by the silence or trying to ease the tension? “Could it be terrorists?”

“It’s something they’d do. Fly a plane into the World Trade Center.”

“Big deal. Scare the hell out of us.”

Each time a cell phone rang, the message was the same—both towers hit, both towers burning.

Firemen huffed past, pushed their way up through the crowd, gasping for breath from the weight of the equipment strapped to their backs.

Meredith touched a fireman’s shoulder. “Several stayed in our office on twenty-seven.”

“We’ll send them down. Don’t you worry, lady.”

She watched each man pass. The grim determination on their faces reminded her of war movies when soldiers charged toward the front line. She imagined that her dad’s face must have looked that way in Vietnam—before he dashed into a firefight—carrying no illusions about safety.

“Sort of makes you ashamed,” the man behind her said. “We’re rushing out of here, and they’re plowing straight into all that smoke.”

“Yeah,” she choked back tears. Was she about to run from the one person who depended on her? Could she disappear, abandon Harvey if terrorists started attacking?

The lights blinked, and blackness distorted her sense of balance. Like a chorus, the stairwell gasped in unison and then fell silent. Only the sound of shuffling feet moving steadily down the stairs and the creaking and popping of the walls kept the darkness from closing in, smothering, cutting off her breath. From above, a deep rumbling shook the stairs. Her ears rang; she gripped the handrail. The steps swayed. Were they coming down like collapsing dominoes? After all this time, were they about to be crushed by falling steel and concrete?

“Take hold of the shoulder in front of you.” The voice came from below, echoing out of the blackness, a sound of authority, of reassurance.

The man’s big firm hand clutched her shoulder. It felt like a hug. “Thank you,” she whimpered as she reached to grip the shoulder in front of her. His shirt felt wet, drenched in sweat. She squeezed tighter to seal the human chain, to let him know he was not alone.

Inching toward the bottom, it felt as if they were concentrating on stepping down in sync like dancers, knees bent, feet light as springs to avoid jostling, to prevent losing touch.

Voices drifted up. “Watch out; it’s wet here.”

In one step, water began splashing against her pant legs, oozing over the tops of her shoes. It would only take one loose wire dropping into all this slush to electrocute them all. The hand squeezed her shoulder as if he shared the fear—a reminder to pass it on to the sweat-soaked man in front.

Voices rose, swept like a wave up the stairs. “We see light!”

Rounding the next flight, a sheen reflected off the water-soaked walls. The line ahead exited through a door into a huge smoky area. The roar of relieved chatter grew louder as she inched one slow step at a time toward the glare.

“Oh, God,” the man behind her moaned. “I never thought we’d make it.”

As if stepping unrehearsed onto a stage, the glass-walled mezzanine was a jumble of confusion—the actors did not know their lines. A few tried crowding onto the frozen escalator descending into the lobby. Others stood in a daze, waiting for a director. The chain had broken; the hand on her shoulder let go. Then he moved up beside her—a tall, skinny guy, his bloodshot blue eyes smiled over the top of the handkerchief tied over his nose. She had imagined him short and stocky with stubby strong hands—a take-charge type who protected women and children.

“We better get going,” he shrugged like an embarrassed kid. “My name’s Marty. Marty Savage.”

She nodded, torn between wanting to keep him near, and fearing she could never get away. “I’m Ethel Merman.” *Where did that come from?* She smiled at his startled look. “My parents were big fans.”

“Exit the lobby, and walk toward Church Street.” The authority in the voice on the bullhorn shoved them toward the door.

Bumping forward with the crowd, they stepped outside into a choking gray

mist drifting with them into a foreign world of twisted steel, wires, and mounds of paper. A circle of people hovered, forming a coven of horror, staring at a hand splayed palm up on the ground. Turning away opened a kaleidoscope of bodies scorched black and burst open—

“Don’t look.” Marty grabbed her elbow, shoving her around ripped-apart pieces of office furniture.

Bellowing sounds of human agony mixed with city shrieks of sirens. People milled like sleepwalkers staring upward. Through the swirling grayness, the hole in the sky forced a cascading chorus of disbelief. “It’s gone! The South Tower’s gone!”

Paralyzed, they clung together gazing up at the black smoke roiling out of their tower. It was impossible to see what floors were involved. She kept hearing Pierre tell his wife that he loved her. Did the firemen persuade him to get out?

Objects were falling down the side of the building. Her heart lurched as an object became a man hurtling toward the ground, his red tie covering his face, his arms and legs flayed out, clawing the air. He slammed into the pavement with such force that his life was transformed into a mound of bloody pulp. Was that her scream? Bile surged into her throat. Forcing it down, she started toward the body.

A policeman stepped in front of the hulk of flesh that had been a man who wore his red tie to work. “Get her out of here.” He spoke to Marty. “You may be hit. Move on.” Then he raised his voice. “Move on. Go north. Keep going.”

Marty said, “Take a breath. Start walking.”

She nodded, sucked air through Pierre’s t-shirt, and felt Marty’s hand pushing her forward.

“You’re tougher than that,” she whispered, repeating her mom’s mantra. Even as her mom was dying, she kept saying, “You may be twelve, but you’re tough.”

“You can make it. Move, make yourself move.”

Marty must have heard her, wondered if she was losing it. “Yeah, you’re tough.” He stayed right beside her.

Sirens blared; firemen ran with hoses. A woman sat on the curb, blood running down her face, dripping onto her arms and legs. A man knelt before her dabbing at her cuts with his handkerchief.

Meredith clutched her satchel tight and began walking. Lunchtime jogging had saved her. She could move when so many seemed too tired to take another step.

They did not speak, weaving through the crowds standing transfixed, staring in disbelief at the carnage. Occasionally they turned and looked at the black boiling smoke rising from their building. Everything familiar had disappeared. Windows along the street gaped with jagged glass, a soot-stained curtain flapped where a window had been.

Marty grabbed her arm. “It’s falling; it’s falling! Run! Run, for God’s sake!”

Their tower bulged like a giant filling its lungs for one last ferocious blow. They ran with the crowd, not daring to look back.

Meredith felt the shove against her shoulder as a huge man, gasping, lurched past. Within a few feet, he barreled into a tiny woman, slamming her into the curb. As she struggled to stand, the crowd surged around her.

In one movement, Marty bent, scooped his arm around the woman's shoulder.

Meredith shoved her satchel to her right side, slipped her left arm around the tiny waist. They lifted the woman between them, beginning a steady jog—right, left, right, left.

She concentrated on breathing, keeping the rhythm, not looking at Marty, feeling the pace that formed them into one motion.

The woman's very young, black face contorted in pain; tears streaked her ash-caked cheeks. "My leg," she whimpered before her head dropped forward.

People pushed past. Soot rained down. Shouts and screams drowned by the booming, ripping sound of steel and blown-out glass as the giant tried to suck them into its death struggle.

"Breathe deep and run; breathe deep and run," she panted as she concentrated on staying in step with Marty.

A policeman directed the crowd, urging everyone to keep running. "It's only a few blocks up Greenwich to the triage center. Can you manage her that far?"

"Sure," they spoke together.

Marty looked at her, and his eyes, from above the handkerchief, crinkled into a smile. He was covered in ash, his hair an indistinguishable mat of gray, his lashes powdery.

As they approached the triage unit, medical personnel converged on them, lifting the woman onto a gurney.

Marty turned to Meredith, pulled off his filthy handkerchief to wipe his face. "You were great. I couldn't have made it alone."

*This is it. He can't identify me.* She lowered her eyes to confirm the t-shirt was gray with soot. "I've got to keep going."

"Wait. We've been through too much for you to leave like this..." He extended his hand.

She let him grip her, then pulled back. "I must go."

He touched her arm with the tips of his fingers. "Shouldn't you catch your breath? It's been a hell of a morning."

"You kept me sane." She leaned close, willing him to understand. "But I've got to go."

"Sure." He squinted as if trying to see behind her soot-crust mask.

It seemed crazy to shake his hand after they had almost died together. She squeezed his arm. "I'll always remember you." She couldn't look into his face again, or she might not be able to go. This was it, the chance she had waited for. Taking longer strides than usual, she moved quickly into the stream of gray figures hurrying to get somewhere. Most of them looked as if they didn't know where.