

The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending

by Catherine Brunelle

(A taster excerpt from Chapter 3: Mrs. Dorothy Claire Brennan's story, 1958. Dorothy is the third Claire we meet in the novel, and Elizabeth's mother . . .)

“Dotts!” cried Mrs. O’Bannon. The woman pulled off her raccoon hat and revealed rollers pinned to her head.

“Mrs. O’Bannon?” replied Dorothy.

Mrs. O’Bannon was like those blue-eyed, blonde women in Pepsi commercials: all smooth and peachy, but with their hair done up. She was known for her flawlessness. And for being a scandalous divorcee who’d seduced the mayor on his holiday to Montreal and married him within a week of their meeting. But this afternoon Mrs. O’Bannon looked more excited than graceful, with her loose curlers, fur jacket, and an imperfect smear of lipstick across her mouth.

“Dotts, put on your coat! You *must* see this.”

Dorothy held onto the craft she was making, a paper chain for the Christmas tree. “I can’t leave the shop.”

“Close it up!”

“But Patrick will kill...”

“Dotts, we’re going to miss it!” Lulu O’Bannon anxiously looked out the window. “And I came here just for you.”

“What’s the matter?”

Dorothy had met this now frantic woman one year ago in the post office. Mrs. O’Bannon had then been wearing a navy dress that fanned from her hips, pinched in at the waist, and was topped with a scooped neckline. She was by far

the most beautiful woman in town, which fitted the expectation everyone had for a wife of the mayor, even if she was a divorcee remarried. Katie Bantry, the bank manager's wife, had been sour for weeks after the Mayor's remarrying, realizing that she was now relegated to second place in the town's unofficial beauty pageant. To top it all, she could never compete with the mayor's wife's charming French accent. She would glare at the new addition to Arnprior society and encourage the other ladies to follow suit, not that Mrs. O'Bannon ever noticed. She didn't give most of the ladies in town more than a second glance - except for Dorothy, whom she seemed to notice almost immediately. It was, for Dorothy, secretly thrilling.

During that first encounter, Mrs. O'Bannon had purchased a postcard with a special edition pole jumping stamp, saying how she liked the river photograph on the card. She wrote a message with Patrick and Dorothy watching her, getting their first look at the latest sensation in Arnprior gossip. Dorothy had a natural curiosity toward postcards, and when she saw that the card was addressed to '*Cher Maman, et ma belle soeur*' in Montreal, well, for some sentimental reason, she instantly liked the mayor's new wife and couldn't help but smile at her.

Now that Dorothy was three months pregnant, Mrs. O'Bannon was inviting her over for teas, talking about maternity fashion, and asking 'Dotts' to call her Lulu. There was something about this woman that Dorothy found difficult to deny.

"No more questions, just come along. *Vite!*"

"Alright," sighed Dorothy. She left the chain and half-finished sandwich. Ducking into the back room, she slipped into a pair of Patrick's hunting boots, threw on her old, beaver-fur coat and grabbed a red flannel hat, tucking her rope of black plaited hair beneath the coat collar. Unlike Lulu, Dorothy failed to look like a porcelain doll against the fur. She merely disappeared into the wrapping.

Ding, ding. Lulu was ringing the front bell. *Ding, ding.*

“Coming,” called Dorothy. And with a sigh, she hurried out.

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-Catherine :)

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