

The Girl in the Trees

by Tom Lichtenberg

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Chapter One

Tara Carter was worried about the girl, though she knew it was none of her business. "As if I don't have enough troubles of my own", she told herself, but still it just didn't seem right, that girl being all alone up there on the mountain with nothing but her grandfather and that old mare she came in on. Once a month, "regular as sunrise" as she liked to say, here she'd come, riding down into the valley with a few dozen fresh farm eggs, all carefully banded and stowed, some goat cheese and some bars of homemade goat fudge, and every now and then a jar of fresh clean honey. She'd swing down off the horse and sling that satchel over her shoulder, bring it into Tara's family's little country store and hoist it onto the counter with barely a word, maybe a nod and a grunt as if she were a little cowboy from the movies.

Calvin Harden, Miranda's grandfather, never accepted a dime for these offerings. He felt it was something he owed for the service the store provided of just being there when he needed it, as if his once a month dispatch into the known world was enough to keep it all waiting with endless patience for his trivial little gifts. Tara's parents had been dealing with the man all their lives, so even Tara knew better when she was at the counter than to try and give the girl any cash. Instead they subtly subtracted a few bucks here and there from the running total as the grandfather - or the girl, whoever it was who came shopping if not both - piled up the items they needed. It usually wasn't much, mostly ingredients like flour and sugar and oil and butter and rice and dry beans. They seemed to have everything else they required.

The Carters had other typical characters, who'd wander into the tiny town of Los Arboles every now and then to pick up a few things. Los Arboles wasn't even properly a town, more a collection of houses and a post office and the Carter's small country store. It was thirty miles from anywhere, and the few people who lived there practically drove their cars for a living, heading up over the mountains and down into the adjacent Valley of the Sand, where all the paying jobs were. Tara made that trek on most days. Her real job involved sitting at a desk and re-arranging the data on spreadsheets according to arbitrary work orders that arrived from consultants worldwide. It was all part of "providing end-to-end solutions", or whatever it was that Global Highware existed for. Except when she was back in Los Arboles, filling in for her aging mom or dad at their sorry excuse for a store, she was on the grid, fulltime. She couldn't imagine being off that vast network of modern convenience that supplied her every need.

Calvin Harden never was a dirty hippie or anything like that. An old-fashioned rancher in some respects, he had also taken what he needed from the new. It was a hell of a lot easier that way. As a younger man he had put in some time in the military and then the shipyards down the south coast, and had some fruits of those labors arriving in the form of social security and pension benefits, all of which went directly into his bank account, "regular as sunrise" as he liked to say. Then when the first cellphone service went in, even way up there in the mountains, he was right on it, ordering up one of those smart phones which gave him and his granddaughter all the internet they'd ever need, featuring online banking, mail order shopping, entertainment and education and books and news and you name it. He'd grown up with candles and wood stoves, but went solar early on, and upgraded his installations every now and then so they had all their electrical requirements satisfied, even down to some of those internal oil heaters. It was a remote, country life and at the same time completely tied in to all the goings-on going on.

It was the only life Miranda had ever known. They owned a few hundred acres of mountain meadow and woodland high up in the Cybelline Mountains, where no road led, only a meandering secret trail. Their ranch was surrounded by so-called "open space", land bought by urban trusts controlled by valley millionaires who wanted to keep their sacred views safe from the relentless pressures of human population growth. Those people must have loved sitting around their fire pits on their new condo decks sipping wine and looking up at

all the pine wood and scrub up there, and that was fine by the Hardens. They had enough pasture for their goats and horses, wood for their stove and fences, room for the chickens to roam, and their own clear view of the dark night sky where the stars were still shining for them.

"She has to be lonely," Tara Carter was thinking, "and what about friends? And what about school? That girl is only about eleven years old!"

"How old are you, Miranda?" she asked her directly. Miranda was methodically packing her supplies, all handily purchased by debit card (when had she even last held any cash?), into the same shoulder bag she'd brought the fudge and eggs in. Miranda glanced up. She couldn't hide the scowl on her face. The girl could look friendly sometimes, when she smiled and her eyes would glitter with mischief, but mostly she kept those thick brown eyebrows down like a red-tailed hawk's, and her bright teeth hidden behind her thin lips.

"Twelve," she said and nodded once sharply. The nod was a proud silent gesture to herself, a reward for having used as few words as possible.

"Don't you get lonely up there by yourself?" Tara tried to further the conversation, but Miranda was nearly done packing up and simply shook her head. Feeling like that was enough to answer all questions, she raised her eyebrows and tilted her face at Tara. This was apparently some kind of communication, at which Tara sniffed with incomprehension. Miranda pulled the bag up off the counter and onto her shoulder and with a brief quiet grunt left the store. The lack of any other customers in the place, or "business as usual" as Tara called it, gave her the opportunity to watch Miranda load herself onto her horse and trot off down the parking lot, across the state highway, and into the forest. She was still worried about the girl, even though she knew very well it was none of her business. Everybody's got their own life to live.

Chapter Two

Miranda wasn't worried about Tara. She didn't even know her name, though she'd known her all her life. Most of the times Miranda went down to the store, Tara wasn't even there. Usually it was her parents and Miranda didn't know their names either. Calvin had always referred to them as "the Carters" and either Mister or Missus or "the daughter" for Tara, so that was how Miranda thought of them too. She usually repeated whatever her grandfather said. So it was that she went down there "regular as sunrise" or heated up the stew so it was "bubbling and boiling" or made sure the chickens "ran on in" and the

goats "hunkered down for the night". She didn't have any sayings of her own that she knew about. Lately she had picked up some new phrases from her cousins that she'd met online but never seen in person. They were Grace, age fourteen, and Lark, her own age. They were the children of her mother's sister, someone else she had never met or even heard of until recently.

She didn't remember her mother (Loretta), or even her father (Dean), who was her grandfather's son and had lived there at the ranch according to Calvin. Her mother had visited once, Calvin told her, but didn't like it there very much. She was a city girl. He'd said that with sort of a growl, so Miranda knew he didn't approve of that. Grace was also a city girl, as far as Miranda could tell and there didn't seem to be anything much wrong with her. She was nice. She had found Miranda somehow on the computer and sent her a message to their @lemonchutney account saying "hey I think we're cousins because my mom and your mom were twins." Miranda didn't like to say much about herself, but she was full of questions for Grace, less so for Lark because he was a boy and Miranda didn't care about them.

She found out that Grace lived pretty far away, a couple hundred miles in completely different terrain. She found out Grace had never met her mom, which wasn't too surprising since Loretta had died when Miranda was a baby. She found out that her aunt, Grace's mom, had been looking for her, Miranda, for years. She still hadn't found out why. This was news that gave her a lot to think about, and was the reason why she didn't tell Grace where she lived. Miranda was pretty sure she didn't want to be found by anyone, even a relative.

"What do you think about that?" she yelled down from her perch in the loft, but didn't expect a reply and wasn't surprised when there wasn't one.

"Grace's mom is named Lucky," she added with a snort. "What kind of name is that for a person? Sounds more like a dog, like a cocker spaniel or something."

Miranda wanted a dog, but not so much that she'd go about getting one. She already had cats, or rather, they had her. There must have been a dozen or more, impossible to keep track of, mostly living out in the barn and spending their time in the woods hunting gophers and moles and crickets and mice. Sometimes one or two would cry at the door and after Miranda let them in they'd sneak around the walls of the house, cautiously inspecting everything until demanding to be let outside once again. She wouldn't have minded them

staying, even spending the night, but none of them really liked being inside. She guessed they missed their friends too much.

Up in the loft, which was really just a long balcony built up over the downstairs, Miranda clicked off her phone and plugged it back into the long white extension cord which connected it to the main solar batteries. She climbed over the railing and let herself drop the eight or nine feet to the hardwood floor below, ignoring the ladder which hung from the rail and was the only proper way up or down. It was only four-thirty and she still had plenty of chores to get done. She had all the time in the world but it still seemed like she hardly had any. There was water to fetch from the well and clothes to be washed. There were the two horses who needed attention, goats to be milked, chickens whose eggs needed gathering. The vegetable garden had to be watered and checked for potatoes and carrots and peas that were ready for picking. She'd make a tour of the fruit trees as well and haul out some jars to be cleaned out for canning. She didn't like making a fire because it might draw attention, but there were times it was needed so she'd check on the woodpile. She had one of those hand-pumped radios which she carried around on her belt, but sadly for her it could only bring in one station, and that one played country music. She wasn't a fan but she'd sing along anyway if things got too quiet. Her favorite times of the day were the mornings and evenings when the birds made a racket. Times like now, in the late afternoon, when the creatures were silent, even the goats, were the times that made her uneasy. She'd make her rounds with her ears on alert. She even played the radio softly, just in case there were any unusual noises coming in from the woods. Now and then she heard hikers, who weren't supposed to be up around there. The thing about the open space, her grandfather had told her, was that it wasn't actually "open". Access was restricted to mainly rangers and docents, not to the general public. There was no camping, no hunting, no hiking or biking allowed, but every so often there'd be somebody out there, and Miranda didn't like the idea they just might find randomly appear.

If they came up to the house, there'd be trouble, like there had been before. Her grandfather was famous for that. Ever since she was tiny, she'd been given the job of cleaning the rifle, and it wasn't by accident that she liked to do that right then in the late afternoons, when silence was over the place. She'd take a seat on the old bench where she couldn't be seen from without, and put the

gun over her knee and take the best care of it then while peering out through the window into the trees. There was always a box of shells on the table beside her.

Funny thing was that as soon as the birds started singing at dusk, all that tension would just disappear. It had to be superstition, the idea that strangers would only show up between two and four thirty in the still afternoon. She would laugh at herself for being so silly but she also believed that somehow, deep down, she was right.

Chapter Three

Her grandfather had never been religious. There was no saying of prayers at their simple stews or before saying goodnight and going off to their beds. He'd never had any strong beliefs in any direction as far as she knew. He was just a man who'd had enough of the world and went his own way. He'd always promised that whenever she wanted he would take her out there and show her around, even arrange to pick up a car and go for a drive, a suggestion that always got her laughing out loud. Imagine Calvin driving a car! She'd never seen him drive anything but that narrow little cart he'd built by himself and would attach to the horses whenever he needed to haul something large up the hill. He'd shake his head in mock mourning when she teased him like that. Of course she knew he'd once driven a forklift, made his living that way, but the thought of it still cracked her up.

She had no inclination to go visit the real world in person. She could see quite enough of it through the screen on her phone. Whenever it had enough charge, she could listen to music from all over the world, watch movies or television shows, people's home videos from everywhere. She'd found her favorite music that way, cumbia from Colombia. She especially enjoyed watching soap operas from Hungary and was teaching herself Hungarian that way. She'd made a study of geography and seen pictures of all the famous beautiful places. She'd seen lots of faces and heard lots of voices and had friends, invisible friends it's true but people she'd talk to, even out loud. She had even tried talking with people in Hungary. She still had a long way to go. She allowed herself two hours a night, after chores, after supper, just before bed. She let herself read during the day when she had a chance, and a lot of that also occurred on the phone. Lately her cousin had been trying to convince her to invest in a laptop, but Miranda was hesitant. There wasn't a whole lot of

money coming in, and the cellphone charges were already more than she was comfortable with. You had to be frugal when you lived on a limited income. Besides, she was good with her thumbs on the virtual keyboard, and could see everything well enough. A laptop would only be bigger, that's all, and she didn't see the advantage. Sure, there were some things the phone couldn't do, but she figured that was only a matter of time. She'd already seen how quickly the upgrades were coming.

Her cousins never seemed satisfied. It was strange. She'd only met them a few weeks before, and they were so full of needs and desires. She hadn't known people like that. Lark was always on to the next video game, and the new video game system it always required. Grace was changing her hairstyle weekly. Miranda had given up complimenting her because she could tell that Grace didn't care. She'd never be happy with the way that she looked. And she was always giving Miranda advice that Miranda would never take. Do this with her face. Do that with her hair. Do something else with her clothes. There was nothing wrong with her clothes, Miranda said to herself. When she needed new jeans they came in the mail, same with her t-shirts and boots. Last Christmas her grandfather had bought her an L.A. Kings cap and she'd worn it continuously ever since then. Nearly a year. Nearly a year since he died and left her alone. And still nobody knew.

Miranda was proud of herself. She'd kept it together this long, and her only problem was how to keep out the world, to make it so it would leave her alone. She understood very well what the challenges were, and the risks. She was walking a line, and it seemed to get finer and finer. Now her cousins were asking about visits. Now the Carters were getting suspicious that they hadn't seen him in several months. On the one hand she knew it could not last forever. On the other hand she was determined to live her own life her own way for as long as she could, even if it meant cutting out the new cousins. Even if it meant keeping the Carters and everyone else in the world from away from her door, whatever it took.

Chapter Four

Miranda liked her life, and she knew the situation was complicated. Yes, she'd been lonely since her grandfather died, but she'd been lonely sometimes when he was still alive, so she felt she could handle that. The work was harder now that he was gone, but she had it under control for the most part. She worried

that something big would happen that she couldn't take care of but so far nothing like that had occurred. She knew very well that if anyone found out the truth about her situation, they would take her away from it, and put her somewhere she would not want to be. She wanted to be right where she was. She had the idea that if she could only make it until she was eighteen, then no one could take her away.

At the same time, she was under no illusions about the complexities. She was still a minor, so the fact that she was probably committing some kind of crime - tax fraud, for example, with the payments coming in, though she was unclear on whether or not there would have been some kind of inheritance benefit in any case - would protect her for now from prosecution, or so she thought. She'd done some research online but didn't clearly understand and wasn't about to go asking anyone, not even anonymously. She was cautious about the internet. She'd read and heard too much about issues of privacy and security online to be confident. She was already concerned that her cousins could track her exact location if they wanted through her connection information. She wasn't sure about that, but it was a concern. She seriously did not want to be disturbed in her nest.

She did not join many groups online, but the ones she did were obscure and populated mainly by foreigners, people who had no interest in her family life or whereabouts. She did not discuss such personal matters with them, but stuck to general topics, opinions and such. Her favorite online contact was a girl from outside Kiev named Irina. Irina also lived on a ranch, more like a farm, and they met while playing an interactive world-building game. They talked about chickens and horses and goats and other familiar subjects. Miranda enjoyed sharing details about her daily routines and liked hearing Irina's gossip about her own family and neighbors. Miranda for her part made up stories about Grace and Lark and chatted as if Calvin were still around. When Irina asked about her parents, she also invented new lives for them. She didn't see any harm in doing that.

In fact, her parents became happier in her mind than they had been before. Calvin had not been the kind to protect a child from reality, so she knew very well that her real dad, Dean, was a drunk and a small time hoodlum who had spent a good deal of time in various prisons. She knew that Loretta, her mom, had been a methamphetamine addict who stole whatever she could whenever

she had to. They had both been caught stealing by Calvin, who was not the kind to protect his own son from the consequences of such actions. It was also an event which marked the last time he kept anything valuable on the property. He'd moved his entire financial world online, so there was nothing left otherwise for Miranda, no cash, no jewelry, no bars of gold or hidden treasure. Miranda had no clear memory of either of her parents. According to Calvin, she would never have to worry about those two ever again, so she didn't. Instead, she gave them both much better new lives, where her mother was successful in real estate, and her father was on the road selling computer equipment most of the time.

She didn't change anything about Calvin, except the fact that one night, about eleven months ago, he'd fallen asleep and didn't wake up. He was slumbering still, in the box that he'd built, in the hole that he'd dug, and he'd gotten there by means of a system he'd devised for "when the time came". She had only to roll his body onto the sturdy wheeled cart, raise up its sides and put on the lid. After screwing that down, the next step was to push the cart over toward the back door, which was wide enough and led out to a short easy ramp. From there she had only to attach the cart's leather straps to the buggy and hitch up one of the horses. When they got to the hole, a lever released a spring load which lifted one side of the cart and made the box slide off and topple into the ground. Calvin used to tell her he didn't much care which way he ended up facing. Afterwards, she filled in the hole and that was probably the most difficult part, because the mound of dirt standing by had grown hard in the cold. Calvin would have apologized for having died in the winter, but he would have been proud of the way she'd fulfilled his instructions.

She still talked to him now, every day at least once, whether she was inside the house or out and about doing the work that she'd grown up doing by his side. He'd been sixty seven years old and still in great shape, except for his heart. Like her, he was not given to using too many words. It kept people from asking him questions. He used to like to tell her that the more you talk, the more people ask. She'd proven that theory in the virtual world, so in the real one she tried to say as little as she possibly could. She knew that if she started babbling, to one of the Carters down at the store for example, it wouldn't be long until they knew everything. The best offense, in her case, had to be defense.

Miranda didn't really think she'd be able to get away with her plan. For the first few months after Calvin passed on, she woke up every day expecting the sheriff to be sitting outside the front door, armed with a big fat social worker lady and they'd take her away, put her into some kind of group home, where the other kids would push her around and take all her food. Calvin's general attitude towards people had wormed its way into her mind. They were all "looking out for number one", he would say, and why shouldn't they be? A person is the only thing he's got. Who else is going to walk in your shoes if not you? After a while, though, it started to seem like maybe, just maybe, she could make it out there on her own.

She could do all the work. She knew that. She knew how to take care of herself. Calvin had been a great teacher, and he'd set the place up. Sure, sooner or later some bad thing would happen, the horses might take sick and die for example, or a storm might knock out the windows, or a hundred unexpected details like that which might require some outside intervention. Even then, if she approached it with the right mind, she might get away with near anything. She could always say that Calvin was out for the day if somebody had to show up to do work. She could handle a situation like that. If she played her cards right then maybe, just maybe she could make it all work, but six years was a very long time. She told herself to take it one day at a time.

Chapter Five

Tara Carter wasn't unusually given to gossip, but gossip was in a sense a big part of the family business. Being the only place in town aside from the post office and the biker bar, everyone around was in and out of there on a pretty regular basis. It was just a matter of course to pick up on snippets of this and that and pass them along. This was how, as they said, Daisy Quentin knew that Jack Billings had nearly drowned at Crown Lake ten miles away before he was even pulled out of the water. Word traveled fast. Everybody knew pretty much everything there was to know about everybody else, and this without any electronic social networking.

The fact that nobody had seen Calvin Harden that calendar year was common knowledge, but it was not a surprise to anyone. Calvin had worked up a solid reputation for wanting to be left alone. His property was marked on all sides by No Trespassing signs, and violaters had actually been prosecuted. This was a

definite fact that had built up no shortage of resentment among some of the local so-called hunters who liked nothing better than to train their coon dogs up in those mountains. It was entirely illegal, of course, but if there was one trait shared among nearly all Los Arboleans, it was the concept that being remote from traffic signals meant being outside the regular law as well. Still, they respected Calvin's Law and for the most part steered well clear of him and his rifle.

Tara had the girl on her mind, though, and brought it up with her parents at dinner after she'd seen her down at the store. The dinner was obligatory on the elder Carters part. If Tara was going to do their shift for them, they were going to cook her up a storm. This time it was a roast with mashed potatoes and green beans, like a holiday meal. Mrs. Carter didn't think it was a fair trade-off and grumbled quite a bit while she bustled around in the kitchen, her daughter sitting out in the living room with Mr. Carter watching college football and drinking beer. Just because she'd wanted to do some shopping in the city it didn't seem right she had to fix a feast for that lazy no-account daughter of hers. That's how Mrs. Carter saw it at least.

Tara didn't consider herself lazy though she might not have put up a fight about the no-account bit. Here she was, twenty five years old, four years out of college and working as a paperless paper pusher for some stupid corporation, no other future in sight. She had had a list of boyfriends, tiring of each one after an average of thirteen months and twelve days. Her latest, some guy named Rick, was currently lowering that rate. He was a biker she'd met in town one Saturday night, and had developed the unpleasant habit of only showing up whenever the heck he felt like it, which was usually very late at night when he was quite drunk. Tara had already told him twice to stop coming around. Next time, she said, she'd really mean it. Trouble was, she liked to ride fast through the curvy mountain roads in the dark and in the rain and so did Rick. It was like any moment could be their last, and there was nothing to compare with that thrilling sensation.

"Saw Miranda," she said while helping herself to another ladle of gravy. Mrs. Carter snorted in disapproval, not of the girl but of the helping.

"Still no sign of the old man?" Tara continued, ignoring her mother's frown.

"Nope," said her father, who was methodically cutting his beef into very small pieces. As a storekeeper he was just as precise, continually rearranging the

stock on the shelves so that all of the packages were face out, front and center, ready for purchase.

"Not a word?" Tara asked.

"Nobody's seen him," her father continued, now arranging the pieces into a grid on his plate. "Not since when?" he said to her mother. "Christmas, I think?"

"Think it was," Mrs. Carter replied, stabbing at a green bean with her fork.

"Remember he called? Asking if we had any poppy seeds."

"Sure, that's right," Mr. Carter agreed. "First and last time he called up, so far as I know. Said he was making something special for the girl, wanted to make sure we had poppy seeds before he came down."

"Course we didn't have any poppy seeds," Mrs. Carter went on. "Why would we? Nobody ever asks for those things."

"So what happened?" Tara asked, reaching for another slice of roast beef.

"I don't think he ever came for 'em, now, did he?" Mrs. Carter asked her husband.

"Nope. The girl finally did, though."

"Oh," Mrs. Carter said, "so that's what happened. I guess I thought you just sent all them poppy seeds back."

"Nope, the girl came," Mr. Carter repeated.

"And nobody's ever seen him since then?" Tara asked, at which both her parents sniffed and shook their heads, because hadn't they already said so?

"I worry about that girl," Tara went on, but all her mother said was,

"That girl don't need your worrying. Worry about yourself if you have to be worrying."

Tara did not appreciate the comment, and used it to justify her leaving the house straight after dinner without even offering to help with the dishes. She also said she expected her boyfriend to show up at "her place" any minute. Considering that "her place" was the cabin out in their own back yard, her explanation was not sympathized with. She had a plan, though. Next time she worked in the store, she'd take some time to go through the old phone bills, and see if she could track down that number.

Chapter Six

Grace had also looked through old records, though in her case it was her mother's email account. She knew very well she shouldn't be doing that, but come on, how could she be expected to resist? She'd been trying to figure out her mother's password for years, and when she finally came up with it, thanks to a keystroke-capturing program her brother had installed, her mother's world had suddenly become her oyster. It was no secret that her mother had had several boyfriends since the divorce. Grace and Lark had known most of them, or so they thought, but wow. Perceptions can change in a heartbeat.

Lucky Rison, it turned out, belonged to many, many online dating sites and groups and was corresponding concurrently with at least a dozen different men. It took the children several nights worth of illicit reading, after they had copied the directory onto a USB stick which they then plugged into their own machine, just to catch up with the latest. The woman in those emails was not the woman they thought they knew as their mother. This was someone who did things they did not really want to think about, yet the writing was so compelling they had to read every word. A lot of gaps were filled in, explaining such various time lapses as all those hairdressing appointments from which she returned with the very same hair, those shopping excursions from which she returned with no shopping, and those nights working late when no one had answered the phone in the office.

Lucky, it seems, was busy keeping up with her nickname. Born Lucille Robbins, identical twin sister to Loretta, she had come by the "lucky" monicker as a very young girl, when her father had cheated at some carnival game in order to win her a goldfish. Ever since, she'd been known as the favored one. While her sister had trouble in school, Lucky sailed through. While her sister ran with a bad crowd, Lucky met and married a life insurance broker, a dreadfully boring young man named Barry Rison, with whom she had the two kids, a nice house, a nice car, and a very lucrative settlement. Lucky now worked part time as a receptionist for a law firm, and apparently made a lot of contacts that way. Her address book was rather extensive.

One of the listings in there belonged to Calvin Harden. Grace and Lark had to work their way back to the one and only correspondence with him. By that time, they'd grown used to the patterns of reconnaissance, foray, skirmish and retreat so typical of their mother's liaisons. Grace was even at the point of drawing up charts, while Lark was trying to think of a way to turn their

mother's love life into a video game. The Calvin email turned out to be radically different. For one thing, the initial note was very formal, not like the usual happy-go-lucky Lucky they knew. For another, it referred to an aunt they'd been completely unaware of up to that moment.

"What?" Lark nearly shouted, looking up from his Legos as his sister read out the email. "Read that again!" he demanded.

"Dear sir," Grace dutifully began, "It has recently come to my attention that you may be in possession of some information regarding my sister, Loretta Robbins. I have not seen or heard from my twin in nearly ten years and would be most grateful for any assistance in contacting her. Sincerely, Lucille Rison."

"Sister?" Lark jumped to his feet and ran to the desk where his sister was hunched over her laptop.

"Twin sister!" Grace corrected him as they both scanned the email yet again.

"What did he say?" Lark demanded, as Grace clicked on the reply.

"Lucille," the email began, "I am sorry to say that I did know your sister. I had the misfortune to call her my daughter-in-law after she married my son. I regret to inform you that she died a year later. Calvin."

"That's it?" Lark could not believe it. "She died? That's all he has to say? What about next?"

Grace clicked through and read the note in which her mother asked Calvin for more information, but Calvin did not respond. She wrote him again, two more times, and still he did not reply. After that, she gave up. The most recent attempt had been two years before.

"How come she never told us?" Lark wanted to know, but Grace only shook her head and sighed.

"Maybe for the reason she never told us about any of this" she said, gesturing at the screen full of emails. "Mom's full of secrets. Who knew?"

"It's not fair," Lark complained. "It's our . She ought to have told us."

"Yeah, you're right," Grace said, "but what are we going to do about it? We can't come out and ask her, hey, how come you never told us you had a twin sister? She'd going to want to know how we found out."

"Yeah," Lark sighed. "We can't ask her."

"We can't tell her about any of this," Grace swore him to silence and he had to

agree.

"But we can write to that Calvin," he suggested. "Tell him who we are. Maybe he'll talk to us."

That was how it began. Grace and Lark wrote the nicest little email to Calvin, and Miranda replied. She didn't know either, about her own mother's twin sister, or that she had cousins, or anything else. At first, Grace and Lark peppered her with questions, but Miranda became more and more reticent in her answers. She told them only that she lived with Calvin in the Cybelline Mountains near the Valley of the Sand, but she wouldn't be more specific than that. She did give them her number, and they talked on the phone a couple of times, but Miranda would hardly say much. She was better at writing, she said, so they resorted to online chatter instead. The initial excitement wore off, and after a short time the contact tailed off. Lark soon forgot all about her, and Grace put her on the back burner.

Chapter Seven

Miranda had simply assumed Calvin's old email account without thinking, just as she'd taken over his bank and cellphone accounts. He hadn't been getting many emails anyway, mostly financial notifications and spam. It never occurred to her to look back through the old stuff until she heard from Grace. Even then she was hesitant to go snooping around like her cousin had done, afraid she might come across things she didn't really want to know about, just like Grace. Miranda figured she already knew all she needed to know about her grandfather, having spent every single day of her life in his company up to the day of his death.

Yet she also knew there had to be a whole lot of which she was ignorant. Living according to his rule of "as few words as possible", Calvin had kept his accounts of his own past brief and to the point. Miranda couldn't conjure up many names or events from his story, and it was on a day when she was missing him most that she decided to delve into the History folder of his email account. Grace had told her about how she'd worked backward and eventually come upon Calvin's address, but Miranda decided to start from the beginning, as far back in time as she could, which was only about as far as her own lifespan, give or take a few months. Before then it seems he had no account, which made sense. Email was still relatively new at that time.

There were probably physical letters somewhere, but if they existed they

were not in the house. She knew every inch of the place and had never found anything of the kind. Emails were all she had, then. In the beginning there were more there were later on. Even before Calvin shared the news of the birth of his grandchild with a select group of friends, those same people, a small circle it seems, had been writing him on a regular basis. Names like Earl and Jarvis and Cookie and Beech cropped up often, concealed within codenamed addresses like theonepeach and holdem, rangerrover09 and missytootoo22. Some of the emails apparently were written by sailors, as they referenced various international ports of call, talking of sandflies in Panama, bikinis in Fiji, hangovers in Singapore and beachfront property in Myanmar. These same messages were filled with obscure inside jokes that Miranda had no way of ever figuring out.

She knew Calvin had been in the Navy and worked in the shipyards up and down the West Coast, so she wasn't surprised to read so much about ships and ports and voyages like that. What did surprise her was Calvin's replies to the same. They were verbose. In fact, in those early emails, from before and around the time she was born, they went on for pages and pages. He talked at great length about the work he was doing there on the ranch, the life he was leading, the fences he built, the improvements he made to the house, the contracts he signed, his dealings with the county and the open space district and his run-ins with various poachers. He complained about neighbors and scolded the sheriffs and worried about how he was going to make his master plan work. He kept coming back to that theme. His big plan, to get off the grid and out of the world, once and for all. He made it plain to his friends that he didn't want to see anyone, for whenever any one of them invited him out to meet in the city when they were due to arrive, he said flat out 'no' and warned them away from his place.

The more this occurred, the thinner the list of correspondents became. One by one they dropped off his radar. He also became much less garrulous. Miranda didn't make the connection, but this transition occurred right around the time she was born. In the last emails leading up to that time, Calvin moaned more and more about the return of his son and "that dreadful thing", which is how he referred to her mother. Dean and Loretta were not welcome. They had not been invited. They shouldn't be there. Yet they wouldn't leave. Calvin wrote to Earl, who seemed to be his best friend of them all, that he was "at the end of his rope" and didn't know what to do. Dean and Loretta were vultures, fiends,

vampire bats, devils. He had no shortage of nouns for the two. They were his personal albatross, his burden, his cross. He had thought himself rid of the boy years before, but no, the creature came back.

Miranda already knew of Calvin's low opinion of her father, his son, but the language he used in the emails still shocked her. She knew Calvin to be a good, honest man, and had never known Dean, but now she felt that her father must have been awful, far worse than she'd ever imagined. She'd thought, well, maybe they just hadn't gotten along, rubbed each other the wrong way, that sort of thing. Here there were descriptions of arguments, fights, violent episodes in which Dean pulled a knife on his father, tried to grab at his gun, threatened to burn the house down, demanded money or else he'd be sorry someday. Very sorry indeed, someday soon. For her part, Loretta was described very rarely and when she was it was only to mention two things - that she was trying to stay off the drugs till her baby was born, and that right after then she'd go back. Then there it was, plain as day. Dean had told Calvin that if he wanted his granddaughter alive, he was going to have to pay up.

Miranda tried to put the pieces together. She went back over the emails again and again, pulling out bits that referenced her birth. Calvin had told parts of the story to Earl, parts to Cookie, more parts to Jarvis and Beech, but never the whole thing together. It was blackmail, pure and simple. Dean had told his father that Loretta was pregnant. Calvin had pleaded with them to get clean. Dean then used that desire to weasel out nearly a year of occupation, free room and board and several thousand dollars. It must have been hell for the old man. Here he had built his own world for himself, single-handedly making his life's dream come true, and then came the world in the form of his son and "that dreadful thing", determined to dig its claws back into him and scratch out whatever it could.

Finally, Miranda was born. Calvin sent the announcement to all of his friends, even the ones he wasn't on speaking terms with anymore. Miranda counted nearly fifty email addresses. "WONDERFUL NEWS" was the subject line, and the body contained

"MIRANDA AMELIA HARDEN, BORN THIS DAY OCT __ 20__, SEVEN POUNDS SIX OUNCES HEALTHY BEAUTIFUL WONDERFUL GIRL, MY GRANDCHILD"

Miranda would cry every time she read that email. There weren't many more after that. One or two contained news that Dean had promised to leave but

demanded more money. Calvin didn't have the amount. He wasn't sure what he was going to do. Finally, a few months after her birth, Calvin told Earl that Dean and Loretta were gone, and they'd left Miranda with him. Her mother and father were mentioned again only once after that, several months later, a brief notice to Earl announcing their deaths. No details were provided.

Chapter Eight

Mornings always began with the list of impossible things, or at least that's what Miranda called it. There were a number of tasks that were becoming more and more difficult by the day, that would soon call for more practical methods. At the top of the list was the winter hay, which the Jessup Hay boys had left a month or so previously at the end of the fire road, about a mile and a half down the trail. So far she'd been taking a few bundles at a time, pushing them off the top of the pile onto the narrow cart while Betty or Wilma, either one of the two gray mares, waited patiently below. The problem was that the pile was becoming reduced to cart level, and soon that would mean lifting or hoisting them up, a job for which Miranda was simply not strong enough. She would need some kind of mechanical aid, or else break down and ask the Jessup boys for help. She didn't want to do that. It would invariably lead to questions.

She'd been studying devices on the internet. What she needed, she knew, was a forklift, and it grieved her that of all the things that Calvin had prepared for, he hadn't yet gotten around to that, the one thing he probably knew best. At least her studies had paid off in one way so far; she'd built a solar-powered opening panel for the chicken run, so it came up by itself in the morning and the chickens could run down the ramp. That item was crossed off the list, but plenty of others remained. She wanted a way to roll up and move and unroll and re-stake the forty by forty foot goat fence. It was just too much trouble to take it all up by herself. She'd resorted to tying the goats into loose groups of three, with an extra length rope at one end which she'd tie to a tree or plant in the ground. She'd lead the four groups to a different thistleweed-filled area of the ranch and leave them properly spaced for a while, then return later to move them again. That was working okay, for the most part, though some of them did get all tangled up now and then. She'd hear them complaining and have to come out and fix it.

She'd kept to the schedule that Calvin had run, and for the most part

everything clicked, but she was beginning to develop her own routine, and wanted to cut down on the time she spent doing the things she liked least, so she could have more for the ones she liked better. Calvin had always insisted on a mid-morning break for his coffee. Miranda didn't need that, so she used that time for watching her favorite soap, A Vilag Forog, and engaging in a little session of chat on A Vilag A Vilag, the show's forum. Then she would practice the new words she learned with the computer-voiced text-to-speech trainer. Some late apples were ready for canning and she'd brought out the jars and the sugar and Splenda. This was going to take up much of her day but she knew she'd be glad that she'd done it once she tasted the sweet apple butter on a cold winter morning the following year. She'd put the task on the impossible list but she knew very well how to do it, from the slicing to the boiling to the spicing and the mashing to the canning. She'd already cleaned out the jars from the previous season and set some aside for the pears which were also ripening quickly. But before she could get down to that, she'd groom the mares some and spend time with them, then make lunch.

Most days the hours flew by, and she'd find herself weary and needing a nap by mid-afternoon, in the silence. She crawled up into the loft and pulled the blankets up over her head, trying her best not to listen to the nagging sensation that someone was coming, that footsteps were crunching along the old gravel pathway. This time they were. She heard voices and they were not in her head, but outside getting louder and closer.

"Calvin?" one of the voices was shouting. It was an older man's voice. "Calvin, you in there? You around?"

"Yo, Cal!" called another, younger man's voice. Miranda froze in her bed. She wanted to crawl over and peek out the window, but she didn't dare move lest she get noticed. The front door was unlocked, she knew. Would they come in?

"Calvin? It's Sheriff Rangold!" the older man yelled, and Miranda tensed up even more. On the one hand, it was good it was the sheriffs. They wouldn't mean her no harm if worse came to pass. On the other hand, they might just come into the house if they wanted. One of them was knocking on the door now and calling again for her grandfather.

"Guess he isn't in there," said the younger man's voice.

"Guess not," the other agreed.

"Could be anywhere on this old ranch."

"Yeah, suppose so. Damn shame to come all this way and not find him."

"You want to go looking around? Could be he's out by those goats I hear bleating."

"You go. I'll write up a note in case you don't find him. You know what to say?"

"Sure, we're just checking. Carters been asking."

"Right, and go easy. Calvin don't like much snooping around. Don't sneak up behind him now either. Make sure he knows you are there before he can see you. The old man gets riled pretty quick."

"No worries, boss," the young sheriff said as Miranda heard them walk off. After a few minutes the other returned, called out once again and then stuck a note under the door. Miranda waited a long time until she was sure they were gone before she dropped down out of the loft and went over and picked up the paper. There was nothing much to it, just like the sheriff had said. The Carters down at the country store just wanted to make sure things were all right, and to ask him if he wanted any poppy seeds again. Miranda smiled. Calvin had wanted to make her a cake. He hadn't gotten around to it, so she'd ended up making it herself, as one last present from the grumpy old man.

Chapter Nine

Lark was the one who let it slip at the dinner table one night. He didn't mean to, and at first, despite his sister's dirty look, he thought he'd gotten away with it. After all, he only mentioned the words 'lemon chutney' to describe his disgust with what his mother was serving.

"What is this? Lemon Chutney?" he'd snickered a moment before Grace kicked him hard in the shin under the table.

"Ow," he blurted involuntarily.

"Something the matter, hon?" Lucky asked blithely. She hadn't been paying attention. She had prepared some kind of poached fish knowing full well the children despised that kind of thing, but really, she'd had quite enough of them lately. Grace was a bundle of drama, full of complaints about every single person she knew, and brought the whole scene to the table each night, right down the list of who was a turd, who was a creep, who was a nuisance, who was a blot, who had no reason to live and who would be better off dead.

Aside from all that were the reasons for such appellations. So-and-so had a butch hairstyle. So-and-so wore stupid clothes. So-and-so would never shut up ("remind you of someone you know?" Lucky wanted to ask). And then there was Lark, Lark and his levels, Lark and his trophies, Lark and his buddies talking non-stop about this game or that and who was ahead and who knew how to do what and build what and make what and shoot what and what what what what what was all she could hear.

"Let them complain about dinner," she said to herself, "I'll make what I want to make." The truth was she also didn't like seafood, but how many days in a row can you make spaghetti, or dry chicken breast, or macaroni and cheese? She never was much in the kitchen and by now at least Grace ought to be helping out more. Why, when she was fourteen ... well, when she was fourteen she was sneaking out nights with her sister looking for boys and unfortunately too often finding them. At least Grace had more self-esteem than she'd had. Grace would make boys come looking for her. As she glanced at her daughter while thinking these thoughts, Lark's comment finally sank in.

"Lemon chutney?" she said to herself. "That's not something you hear every day." In fact, she couldn't remember why it sounded familiar, but it did ring a bell. Later that night she made the connection, and several ideas occurred to her all at once. First, that her children might have been snooping through her computer account. Two, that she never did follow up and find out what happened to her sister, Loretta. The lemon chutney man said she had died but never said how. He never even answered her questions and she thought that was strange. It was clear from his notes - as she read them again - that he had despised and hated Loretta. He was probably glad she was dead. The bitterness shown through his tone. Lucky could guess well enough. Loretta had never been easy to like.

From the time they were babies, Loretta was always contrary. Every day was opposite day for her twin. She was constantly causing problems for teachers, for parents, for kids in the school and around. She was simply not a nice person. Lucky knew that. She was not nice to Lucky, who was probably the one person in the world who could stand her. Lucky thought of her sister as training. If she could put up with her she could put up with anyone, and it turned out to be pretty true. Lucky was hard to upset. She hadn't cried when Loretta had sliced open her dolls with a knife. She didn't fret when Loretta

spray-painted her closet, and everything in it, even her shoes. She didn't whine when her sister waltzed into her room and started kissing her boyfriend right there on her bed. That was Loretta. She was plain awful so what could you do? Lucky got some new clothes, she got a new boyfriend, she got some new dolls. She looked on the bright side. Sooner or later, Loretta was going to provide opportunities for positive change!

It all sort of changed with the drugs. Meth's a killer, as everyone knows. It kills you right from the inside out, and only the truly fortunate ones can survive. It was going to kill her sister, and Lucky could tell. That's why it didn't surprise her when Calvin told her she'd died. She assumed right away what it was. But still, she was curious. What if it wasn't the cause? It was something to talk about anyway, and she was currently dating a lawyer named Bill who claimed to have been a private investigator at some point in the past. He was always going on about that. He only got out of the work because of the danger, and now he had kids and a wife whom he cheated on almost as if it was his duty as a middle-aged man. Bill was a talker all right. Told her over champagne and mussels (her treat) that it would be no problem at all, he'd be glad to. Told her to let him see her computer. She'd brought it. He opened the first email from Calvin, right-clicked and selected the original message, then jotted down some numbers onto his napkin. Tucking the napkin into his pocket, he promised to let her know exactly when, where and how Loretta had passed, even where her body was now.

Bill was as good as his word. It only took him two days to come up with most of the story. Loretta Rison had become Loretta Harden. She'd served some time in Valley State Prison for grand larceny, possession and assault. She'd given birth to one Miranda Amelia Harden. No word since. Nothing in any state, county or federal records, not in the U.S. of A in any case. Maybe she'd gone down to Mexico? That would take some more figuring out.

"Nothing about her passing away?" Lucky was only shocked about that. She was curious about the baby, of course but Bill had no further data on her. "But this Calvin says that she died. There's got to be something somewhere."

"Nope," Bill replied. "I would have found it for sure."

"But he said right there in the email. 'I had the misfortune to call her my daughter-in-law after she married my son. I regret to inform you that she died a year later.'"

"I know," Bill said, "That's why I checked and double-checked and triple-checked. There's no death reported. There's nothing about her husband either, not after the birth of the child. The both of them totally walked off the end of the world. They plain disappeared."

"Spooky," Lucky said, and then, "what else did you find out about this Calvin Harden guy? Do you know where he lives?"

"More or less," Bill said, "but not exactly. Seems he doesn't quite have an address. Seems the guy lives on a ranch up in the mountains. That one's really gone off the grid. All of them might still be up there. They're not hooked up to power, not hooked up to plumbing, not connected to anything hardly. They got a cell tower there, though. The email came from a tiny old place called Los Arboles. Population two hundred and eighty. That's how I tracked him down. Relays, you know."

Lucky didn't know and didn't care. Bill was all right. She believed him and she was kicking herself that all this time, ever since she'd first heard from Calvin, she hadn't even questioned the fact of her own sister's death. She'd felt it was true. It was hard to explain, but when you're a twin, sometimes you just know. Loretta was not in the world. Every instinct in her body was telling her that, and yet, according to Bill, maybe she was. She didn't know how she was going to find out. It was too far away and she had a job, and the kids were in school, and she hated to drive. Maybe she could ask Bill? It was something to consider. She'd have to figure out first just how much she liked him.

Chapter Ten

In the days and weeks after the sheriffs came around, Miranda had become steadily more nervous and worried. Their mention of the Carters had made her afraid to return to that store, now that she knew they were poking around about Calvin. The only other alternative she knew of was the Beach Front General Store much farther away. She had gone there one time with her grandfather when she was a very small girl, and it seemed to her that the trip had taken forever. Looking it up on the maps she concluded that the ride would be around six hours each way, and even that was only a guess because she wasn't completely sure of the trails. Also, she didn't know if either one of the horses was up for the trip, or which one to choose when it came down to that. They were both the same age and in much the same shape, not bad for horses going on fifteen or so, but maybe not great for something like this.

She wasn't sure of herself for that matter. All this time since Calvin had gone she'd been sticking as close as she could to the life that she knew, even though it was really his life she was living, his dream of the way life should be. She was living like a settler in long-settled country, a homesteader staying at home. She knew it was strange, that she was not like most other girls, and that made her even more shy of the world. She wouldn't even let herself cry more than once every two weeks or so. It was slowly getting harder, the opposite of how she thought it would be. She really needed someone to talk to. Talking out loud to his ghost wasn't working too well anymore and she couldn't really make herself understood to her Hungarian soap opera buddies or even Irina. That wasn't the right way anyway. Online was fine for discussing the pros and cons of the housewife's actor's performance, and whether or not the shoe salesman would ever find love, but what was she going to do with herself? Who could help?

She found plenty of family-style forums and lots of advice-type websites, and poked around them for a while. Everybody had their own particular problems but she didn't find a situation quite like hers. The opposite situation was plentiful - kids who had run away from home and were now on their own, but her family, in a sense, had run away from her and left her at home all alone. Once she started looking at those places she realized a whole list of things; that other people had much worse problems than hers, that a lot of kids were seriously messed up, that a lot of parents had let their kids down, that tons of children had no one to look after them, that plenty of people had recently lost loved ones, that so many others were lonely. None of these revelations made her feel better about her own situation, but she did feel even more grateful for how much Calvin had done for her. He had only forgotten one thing, and that was simply because he hadn't intended to die until she was old enough to properly look after herself.

Miranda wanted to put into words exactly what she was dealing with. She started to write down some questions, but every time she got around to describing her present dilemma, she realized that any reasonable "advice person" she wrote to would probably want to alert some authority figure at once. A child in her situation could not be allowed. It was perfectly impossible, morally, ethically, legally, any way you put it and yet there she was and still wanted to be, more or less. A companion would have been nice. She'd thought about putting up something online like a house-mate ad, but

again, who would not turn around and inform social services as soon as they saw, as soon as they knew? She wasn't so much afraid of people with bad intentions as she was of people with good ones, as if anyone trying to help would be hurting instead.

Still she went about her daily routines just the same. The goats didn't know that she was alone; they still needed milking. The chickens didn't know that she was afraid; they were still laying eggs right on schedule. The horses seemed to know that she was uneasy; they nuzzled her gently and made soft, sympathetic whinnying sounds. But the bees went about their business as usual, the haylift project remained to be done, and as the days grew progressively shorter she spent less and less time online and more and more just sitting in front of the woodstove at night in the dark, huddled under her favorite old yellow blanket, and counted the days it had been.

She was sitting like that one cold autumn night when the winter was just coming around. The wind was rattling through the trees and she knew that the morning would see several branches come down amid piles of newly fallen leaves. As she listened to the whistling and the howling of the wind, she didn't even notice the front door being opened, or the person who was coming inside. It was when the door slammed that she jumped up and reached for the gun.

Chapter Eleven

Miranda grabbed the rifle from its box below the window and quickly brought it up to face the intruder, who stopped right where she was just inside the door and put her hands up.

"If you shoot me," she said, "you'll just have a mess to clean up."

Miranda didn't flinch but the woman slowly lowered her hands to her side. She was old, tall and sturdy like Calvin, with a mass of tangled and very white hair piled high on her head. She was wearing a shabby green overcoat and muddy brown boots, and smelled like she'd been sleeping in a barn for a month. Miranda sniffed and came close to gagging on the odor. The old woman laughed.

"You're a nice one, I can see that," she said. "Now do you mind if I come in or are you just going to shoot?"

Miranda lowered the rifle for a moment, but raised it again as the old woman

took two steps forward. The visitor sighed.

"Just make up your mind. My feet are killing me."

Miranda shook her head but put the gun back in its spot. The woman approached the other side of the fireplace.

"Why are you freezing in here? That fireplace don't work?"

"It works," Miranda muttered.

"Then come on, build a fire!" the old woman commanded. "I'm tired and I'm frozen as well. Do you have any tea? I'd love a cup of hot tea."

Without asking, she parked herself on Calvin's big brown leather chair. Miranda found herself obeying without thinking about it. Before she knew it she was kneeling in front of the fireplace, piling up kindling on top of some twigs, surrounding the heaplet with a couple of logs and digging out the long matches from the poker stand.

"Now that's better," the old woman said as the fire began to alight. "Now how about that tea?"

"We only have mint," Miranda said. She wanted to add that she'd gathered and dried the mint leaves herself, and that she was saving it up for a special occasion, and that she really loved the taste of mint tea, especially iced in the summer, but she held back. She wasn't used to talking that much, and anyway, she didn't even know who this person was, or why she was there.

"Sounds yummy," her guest replied with a snort. Miranda went into the kitchen area in the corner of the room, and put a kettle on the hot plate.

"It's freezing in here," the old woman complained. "I don't know why you were just sitting there in the cold. Where are your folks anyway?"

"My grandfather's out," Miranda called from the kitchen. "Out on business. He'll be back tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" the old woman grunted. She was beginning to thaw out a bit and took a long look around her. She saw a dark living room, with only one lamp lit, in the corner where Miranda'd been sitting, and otherwise only the light of the fire. The walls and the floor were old wood and dark. Aside from two chairs, the one she was in and the one where Miranda had been, there was no other seating, and between them was only a small walnut footstool which looked like it served as the dining room table. She could see the balcony

looming above the far side of the room, beneath which were bookshelves crammed with old books, and to the far left the kitchen where Miranda was now. To the right of her, against the far wall, was a door which led, she correctly imagined, to a bedroom.

"Where's the toilet?" she asked and Miranda directed her back to that bedroom, where the bathroom was off to the side. The old woman struggled to her feet, she really was tired, and took herself there. By the time she returned, the mint tea was ready and sitting by the chair on the footstool. Miranda was standing beside it. The old woman towered over her. Not that Miranda was small. She was already five foot two and thought herself tall for her age, but the old woman must have been more than six feet and well over two hundred pounds. To Miranda she seemed like a giant. She smelled terrible too, and Miranda had to stand back as she passed and collapsed once again on her grandfather's chair.

The old woman reached for the cup and took a slow sip.

"Very nice," she grumbled. "Very nice."

She put the cup down and fell fast asleep where she sat.

Chapter Twelve

Miranda hunched by the fire and watched the old woman doze. She was filled with conflicting emotions. A part of her was worried, concerned and confused about the unwelcome presence, and she wasn't decided on how to proceed. She'd said that her grandfather would be back the next day but of course if the woman stuck around she'd discover the lie, and then what? Clearly she had to get rid of her, but would that be easy to do? Who was this woman and what did she want? Miranda assumed she was just some homeless old tramp who'd somehow been wandering around in the hills and seen the faint light coming out through the window. Miranda was now wishing she'd sat in the dark.

Another part of her was genuinely excited, even thrilled. Here there was someone to talk to! There hadn't been an actual guest in the house for so long, and now she was tongue-tied and suddenly shy. She hadn't been able to get a word out, it seemed, and there were so many questions she wanted to ask, and things that she wanted to say. She felt there was something familiar about her visitor, but on reflection she realized it was only her age and her size that reminded her so much of Calvin. It was merely the presence of an old person

inside the house that brought back all of those feelings. How she wished that her grandfather was still alive. He would have known what to do. He wouldn't have stupidly turned into a mute, obedient servant the way that she had. He would at least have found out her name!

Miranda let the fire go out without adding more logs. It had barely warmed up the area around it but she didn't care. She was used to the cold. She switched off the lamp and sat in the dark for a while, then finally picked up the rifle again and hoisted it with her up to the loft. She pulled up the ladder behind her. She felt safer that way, knowing that no one could easily get up to her. Maybe the old woman didn't mean any harm, but Miranda wouldn't take any chances. She had a hard time falling asleep, though, with the visitor snoring below and the stench of her rising above. When she did sleep, she dreamed about blizzards and wandering lost in the trees with only a talking green apple to guide her. The apple gave her conflicting advice, making her turn left, then right, now east and now south. She did whatever it told her until she decided to eat it instead. She brought it up to her mouth but saw that a bite had already been taken out of it, and a worm poked its head out and was laughing hysterically. Miranda awoke startled but the sounds that she heard were the birds, and the ten-minute rooster, and the old woman snoring away.

Miranda leapt down from the loft and got down to business as usual. She would deal with the visitor later. She grabbed a brown pear and headed outside, closing the door quietly behind her. The work kept her mind off her problem. The goats needed milking and being led out to pasture. The horses and chickens needed their feed. She had water buckets to fill from the well, and just enough irrigation to let to the garden. She checked on the battery backups and noted the levels. She collected the eggs from the coop, and by the time she returned to the house it was already late in the morning.

The old woman was no longer in Calvin's chair. For a moment, Miranda thought that maybe the woman had left, simply gone, but then she heard noises come from the bedroom, and moments later the woman came out. She had taken a shower and changed into some of Calvin's old clothes, a white shirt and overall jeans. She had even put on a pair of his work boots. She looked radically changed, fresh and scrubbed, but Miranda's first thought was of how much electricity the woman had used up with the hot water heater. Then she was ashamed of herself about that. Miranda stood, speechless and timid as the

woman walked over to her.

"Hope your grandpa won't mind," she said, laughing "but they are a good fit! Got anything to eat around here?"

She brushed right past Miranda and marched into the kitchen where she proceeded to open up all the cupboards and drawers, inspecting each one before moving on to the next.

"Apparently not much," she grumbled. There wasn't a whole lot to see, just flour and oil and rice and beans, sugar and salt and a few herbs and spices. The tiny refrigerator under the sink held some eggs, some goat milk and cheese. That was it.

"I could make you some flapjacks," Miranda volunteered. "Or some eggs if you like."

"Pancakes and eggs! Sounds good to me," she replied.

"I'll just wait over here," she added and took herself back to the old leather chair and plopped down, apparently believing that Miranda was her own personal maid. She might as well have been. Without another word, the young girl went about making the old woman's breakfast. Her brain was buzzing with all that she wanted to say, but she just couldn't speak. Her visitor didn't have the same problem. Rest and hot water had loosened her tongue.

"It's a hell of a place you got here," she announced. "I like it. Sure do. Don't know how you can stand it, but there you go. Everybody's got their own ways. Grandfather, huh? No mom or dad? No brothers or sisters? Just you on your own and the grandpa? Guess you got a lot of fresh air. You can't bottle that! Uh-uh. No sir. Course you got to like animals. You like animals? You must. Is that sheep I hear? No, got to be goats. And chickens. Those eggs from your chickens? Course they are. Plenty of work to be done on a farm. Your grandpa makes you do all the work? How is that? Going away and making you do all the work? Not much fun. Less you like it, of course. You like all that work? Guess you do."

Miranda didn't bother to answer. She could hardly have, anyway, since the woman didn't pause for a second in her prattle. She kept up the chatter the whole time Miranda was cooking, and then even while she was eating. Miranda stood by her, watching and listening, while the old woman seemed to talk to herself. Was she crazy? Miranda couldn't tell. It was just like watching a show.

Chapter Thirteen

The woman was still jabbering away when somebody started pounding on the door and shouting for Calvin. It was the old sheriff, who had returned this time by himself. It was such a long hike from the fire road that he couldn't convince his partner to come along a second time unless there was a real emergency.

"Calvin? You in there? Come on, open up. It's Jeff Rangold. Sheriff Rangold."

The old woman stopped talking and looked up curiously at Miranda, who was standing as if petrified, unmoving. The old woman whispered.

"Well, aren't you going to get the door?"

Miranda had no choice. She had to go now. Surely the sheriff had seen her, and yes, now he was also calling her name. She let out a sigh that was more like a sob and, sniffing back sudden tears, made her way to the door. When she opened it the sheriff had taken his cap off and was rubbing his bald head with a handkerchief. He looked worn out and red.

"Morning, Miranda," he said, peering inside.

"Good morning, Sheriff Rangold," she replied, and then there was silence for several moments. The sheriff leaned forward, trying to get a better look in the house. From where he was standing, he couldn't see much.

"Mind if I come in," he asked, and as Miranda hesitated he simply brushed by her and went on in anyway. As he did so, the old woman slowly got up from the chair and turned towards him. He nodded a greeting.

"Morning, ma'am", he said, replacing his cap on his head and tapping the brim in a sort of salute.

"Good morning, officer," the old woman said. "Sure is a beautiful day now, isn't it?"

"Bit warm for me for this time of year," the sheriff replied. "I'm not given to walking so much."

"It is a long way up that hill," she agreed with a smile that revealed a few missing teeth.

"Long way," he repeated and then turned back to Miranda who was still standing back at the door.

"Is Calvin around?" he asked her and she shook her head.

"Away on business," she said.

"Business?" the sheriff seemed doubtful. "What kind of business?"

"Family business, he told me, " she said, and then taking a deep breath she added, "he's gone down to Los Angeles. Don't know when he'll be back. Meantime he asked auntie to come here and stay with me."

The sheriff looked puzzled. He'd known Calvin a very long time, and had never yet known him to go off on that kind of journey. Still, "life is long", as a teacher once told him in some foreign language. You never know what might come up.

"Didn't take you with him," he half-asked, half-noted, still speaking to the girl.

"Got to look after the place," she reminded him. He nodded, then turned back to the old woman and said,

"So you're a Harden?"

"Caroline Harden," she replied without hesitation, and reached out her hand. As he took it she said, "most pleased to meet you, officer Rangold."

"Call me Jeff," he told her.

"I'm Calvin's sister," she said. "I haven't been up here in years, not since Miranda was a brand new baby. And look at her now," she clucked. "She's so big, and she's such a hard worker too. You should see her take care of all this." The sheriff nodded.

"Yes ma'am," he agreed, "I know old Calvin is so proud of her. Tells me so all the time." Saying this, the sheriff realized that it had been quite a long while since he'd last seen Miranda's grandfather. He studied the old woman's face, and decided she resembled a Harden for sure. He tipped his cap and turned to leave.

"Well," he said, coming up to Miranda, "I was just making sure. Some folks down in town been a bit worried about your grandfather. Haven't seen him around much these days."

"He don't like to go out," Miranda replied, and immediately wished that she hadn't.

"Yes, I know," the sheriff looked at her closely, but she didn't anything else.

"I'll be off then," he said and walked out the door. Miranda held her breath as she watched him go by. He took several steps, then he turned around, walked back up to her and said,

"If you ladies ever need anything," and he handed Miranda his personal card.

"Thank you, sir," she said, not even glancing at it.

"Have a good day now," he said, and this time he left them for good. Miranda watched from the door until he was gone. That takes care of the Carters, she thought. She could go back to the store as regular. Now there was just the old woman.

Chapter Fourteen

That one had crept over and was standing behind her. Miranda was still lost in her thoughts and didn't notice her until she spoke up.

"Los Angeles, huh?"

"What?" Miranda turned and nearly collided with her. The old woman took a step back and licked her lips while studying the girl. Miranda said,

"I think you should go now."

The old woman laughed.

"You think I should go? Do you now?" She turned and walked back to the big leather chair where she plopped herself down and put her feet up on the woodstove.

"I don't know about that," she said. "I think I might stay."

For the first time since the woman had mysteriously appeared the previous night, Miranda suddenly felt like completely herself once again. She marched over to where the woman was making herself quite at home, and stood right beside her and said,

"I don't even know who you are."

The old woman glanced up at her for a moment, then turned her gaze to the window.

"You can call me Caroline. Caroline Harden. I've been called many things, some much worse than that."

"You're not Caroline Harden," Miranda declared. "My grandfather never said he had a sister."

"No, but you did," the woman now known as Caroline rejoined.

"I don't know why you are lying, but you are," she added. "I've got to think about this."

"You don't have to do anything but leave," Miranda raised her voice. "I've been

nice to you. I let you sleep here. I made you breakfast, let you take my grandfather's clothes. I don't owe you nothing and you got no right to be staying. I said you should go and I mean it."

Caroline looked back at Miranda for a moment, looked away again, but then she stood up and brought her great bulk up against the small girl.

"Tell me about this grandfather of yours," she demanded. "First you said he was away on business, would be back today. Then you tell the sheriff he's gone off to Los Angeles and you don't know when he'll be back. Obviously there is such a person as grandpa. Or was. Maybe not anymore. Is that it? Am I right? He's not coming back. He would if he could but he can't. Why is that?"

"He is coming back," Miranda insisted, pushing her small body up against the intruder's, "and he won't be happy to find you around here. He don't like anyone messing with any of his stuff. Now I got plenty of work to get done and you don't belong here, so go!"

"Maybe he will and maybe he won't," mused Caroline, or whatever her name really was. "You go do your work. I'll just rest here a spell and think about things. I won't get in your way. And mostly I won't give you away. I could have, you know. I could have told that sheriff some story."

Miranda took a step back and crossed her arms over her chest, the way she did when confronted with a difficult problem. A million thoughts were racing across her brain. Where was the gun, for one thing, and she remembered it was up in the loft, safe and sound. What she should do next was an idea full of options. She had counted on the old woman just being some old bag lady lost in the woods, who'd be grateful enough for what she had gotten and would be on her way without further ado. Now it seemed she was wrong about that, but what could the old woman possibly want, and what kind of person was she after all? Miranda needed time and space to think about things.

"I've got my chores to get done," she announced, "and I don't want you here when I return, is that clear?"

"It's clear what you want," Caroline said as Miranda stomped out of the house, slamming the front door behind her. Caroline snorted and dropped herself back into the seat.

"Nice view from here," she said to herself, as she looked out of the window at the trees and the mountains rising beyond.

Chapter Fifteen

Bill Landis considered himself to be something of a primetime ladies man. He like proving himself over and over again. There was nothing so fine as showing off how good he could be and he lived to impress. 'Make the ladies happy, make the children happy' was his mantra, and he was pretty darn good at leg work. He had dug up all that information about Loretta and Dean in no time at all, and had been paid with some admiration from Lucky, but she wanted more. She wanted to know where her sister was now, and Bill Landis was at a dead end. There was nothing. He stalled for more time but in the end it was clear that he would have to go onsite how to get any further. His job would never pay for something like that. Lucky could never pay either. He didn't know how he was going to make it work out. He might have to make it a personal road trip. The Christmas holidays were coming up, and he did like hitting the highways on his Harley, get away from the wife and the kids.

He was a pretty decent investigator, but not so good as a lawyer. He'd made it up to associate by diligent, competent work but would never make partner, not in his current firm or anywhere else. He'd been proud of his talents as a P.I., but grown weary of the seediness inherent in the work. Nearly all of the people he dealt with on a daily basis were small-time, snatching at any dollar they could find. In the legal world, those dollar signs were the size of billboards, and his clients were at least a step or two removed from the street. Within that world, however, competition was fierce, not just for position but for the attentions of a woman like Lucky. She'd had her children early in life and was still in her prime, and every male lawyer in the firm was paying her court. Bill had made more progress than he had a right to expect, but he was still down the line and he knew it. He didn't have much else to offer after the initial data dump, only Calvin's alleged phone number, which he'd called several times and left detailed messages, but no one had answered and no one had ever called back. The voice on the answering machine said it was Calvin, but maybe he never checked on his voice mail.

Lucky didn't think that he checked on his email much either. After contemplating appropriate punishments, she had finally confronted her children and taken drastic, if appropriate measures. She unplugged their router and took it into the office. There was to be no more internet at all in the house for a month. If that meant they had to stay after school to use the

library's computers for homework, so be it. If that meant no phone calls with friends late at night, well too bad. No online video games either. In fact, she took away their laptops as well so there was no gaming at all, no nothing at all for four weeks. The kids were reduced to having to watch television. And of course they were grounded. She meant business. Snooping into her private, personal life was not going to go without consequences. She made damn sure of that.

She also made Grace turn over her own personal emails, so that Lucky could get equal prying. She didn't read many of them, though. She found it as boring and stupid as she remembered being fourteen herself, but she did read the notes from Miranda. It struck her how different her niece seemed from not only her own kids, but from herself, from her sister as well. Miranda sounded older and curiously studious. She wrote about things she was observing for herself and learning from what was around her. She wrote about the subtle changes she noticed in chicks as they grew from one day to the next. She wrote about the different kinds of wind and the music they played in the trees. She wrote about how the horses reacted to various birds. It was strange. Lucky couldn't remember the last time that she herself noticed a bird and knew what it was. 'Probably pigeons', she said to herself, 'or maybe a crow'. In the suburbs there was nothing to see, or there was but who saw it?

Lucky wanted to know more. She waited impatiently for Miranda - or Calvin - to reply to her own querying email, but no response came, and as the days passed she only got more and more interested. She decided her best chance was Bill, so she let him know how grateful she'd be, how much it would mean to her personally. She turned up her smiles and accepted more invitations to lunch, hinted at maybe even a dinner sometime. Bill didn't need too much prompting. He was already planning his winter vacation.

Chapter Sixteen

Miranda had a lot to think about. Since the sheriff's first visit, she had felt like the whole world was slowly closing in on her, only now the pace was picking up. She needed to get away from the house and clear her head, so she saddled up Wilma and hitched the hay cart to her, and set off down the path to the remnants of the winter hay pile. All her built-up tension served her well as she heaved some of the lower bales up onto the cart. She thought maybe she wouldn't need that special forklift gadget if she could just get riled up enough.

That so-called Caroline Harden was doing it for her in a big way, but it wasn't just her. Lately she'd been getting a voicemail message every day from some man she didn't know. He called in the morning, he called in the afternoon and sometimes even in the evening. Every time he left the same message: "Hello, this is Bill Landis, I'm an attorney out of Fresno, trying to get in touch with Mr. Calvin Harden concerning a case regarding his late daughter-in-law, Loretta Harden née Robbins" (at least she heard it as 'née'). I'd sure appreciate if you'd give me a call back at your earliest convenience. My number here is ..."

The same message every time and there must have been twenty or thirty of them all in all. She'd deleted them one by one after listening carefully just to see if there were any variations but there weren't. It was as if he had recorded them and was just automatically playing it back.

She didn't know what "case" could possibly involve her dead mother after all of these years, and she was sure that if Calvin were still alive he would have ignored them just as she did. He'd never made any secret of his loathing for her mom, and nothing would have interested him less than anything involving her. He probably never knew she had a twin sister, either. Miranda hadn't that until she'd come in contact with her cousins, and now their mother, her genuine aunt, was writing her emails as well. Actually, only one email, Miranda had to admit, but it made a major impression upon her. Her Aunt Lucille was very well spoken (or written, whatever you were supposed to say about that).

"Dear Miranda," her email read, "I realize we don't know one another, but I feel, from reading your correspondence with my daughter, as if we were family. You seem like a wonderful person and we would all so much love to meet you in person. You should know that I lost touch with your mother - my sister - some years before you were born. The last time I saw her her name was still Robbins and she still lived out here in Fresno with us. She was sixteen at the time, not much older than my Grace is now. It's so hard to believe! Loretta and I were always close - we shared a room our whole lives until then - and then, after she ran away, well, I never did see her again. We talked a couple of times on the phone. She was lost, needed money but wouldn't come home. I sent her whatever I could, but then, after that, there was nothing. I was only eighteen when I had Grace, and twenty when Lark came along, so your mother must have been twenty as well at the time of your birth. I wish I had been there for that! I wish I had known where she was."

"We are a typical family now. I'm divorced, and the kids don't see much of their dad, who has long since re-married and had another child, a six year old boy named Bodiah. Really, that's what they named him! Anyway, we have a nice house in a quiet cul-de-sac in the suburbs. The kids walk to school - it's only a few blocks away. I work part-time in a law firm as a receptionist. I like my job, and the people I work with. It keeps me on my toes, I suppose. We were hoping that you could come visit sometime. You could stay for as long as you like. We've been trying to reach your grandfather - one of the lawyers in my firm, Bill Landis, tells me he's left many voice mails - but so far we haven't had a response. It must have been difficult for him, raising a child all alone at his age. Or maybe we could come visit you, if you'd like, and if you'd tell us how we can find you. Bill says he can't find an address, but that you live on a ranch in the mountains. That sounds so exciting! Are you happy up there? I sure hope so. Please write and let me know what you think. Will you come and see us? I'll put my address below. Or maybe we will come and see you? Either way, whatever is best, whatever you want. All my love, your long-lost Aunt, Lucille."

Miranda had memorized the note but still read it directly on the phone at least once a day since she'd gotten it. It brought out so many different feelings. She was over her initial reaction to Grace, having since decided that the girl was like all the girls she saw in the movies. In other words, nothing like her. She was afraid of such girls. Miranda herself was so shy, and what she had seen about American girls of her age was truly frightening to her. They had all these little cliques and were hung up on fashions and boys and insulted each other in very mean ways, especially the ones who weren't perfectly pretty and polished. Miranda wasn't pretty or polished, she thought, and she was so shy, she'd never fit in. She'd be the weird one, the odd duck, the one the others would tease and make fun of. She didn't want to go there. She just wanted to be left alone. If they found her and caught her and made her go with them, she'd end up in one of those schools, which as far as she knew were all filled with drugs, and crazy mass shootings by boys in black trenchcoats, and unhappy people all making each other as miserable as possible. She'd looked up about Fresno and shuddered to think of it. It sounded to her like a genuine hell, flat and hot and stretched out for miles with nothing but fast food drive-thrus and sleazy motels, where people had pit bulls behind chain-link fences, and the only thing keeping them sane was the sight of the mountains way off

in the distance. She just wanted to stay where she was, and now there was this old lady.

Chapter Seventeen

She didn't even know who the old woman was, let alone where she came from or what she wanted. She was like a huge, scary sort of human meteor who'd come crashing out of the woods and into her life. Miranda was still pretty convinced the old woman was crazy, homeless most likely, and lost, but she sure made herself right at home. How could a person even do that? Miranda couldn't imagine being like that, just walking right into somebody's house and bossing some kid around as if she deserved it, and if she was some kind of queen. Miranda would have to do some more research on random mentally unbalanced intruders. In the meantime, she had to get rid of her somehow, but how? She was feeling strong now, heaving those hay bales onto the cart, but soon she would have to go back, and then she would have to do something.

Do what? She couldn't find an answer to the question persistently gnawing at her. She'd already asked the woman to leave. Then told her to leave. What else could she do? She couldn't physically push the big ogress out of the house and all the way down the mountain. She had to leave on good terms as well, because maybe she'd go right to the sheriff. How could she bribe her? Miranda didn't have any money. All she had was online accounts. Maybe she could transfer some amount from the bank? Maybe she could make a deposit in some Western Union location and the woman could go pick it up? How much would she want, and wouldn't she then just come back for more? How to make it all reasonable? Miranda was terribly confused. She had to get more information.

As she rode the horse back up the hill, and then in the barn unloading the cart, she tried to map out a plan, but all of her strategems were destined to fail. Caroline was right where she'd left her, occupying Calvin's old chair with her feet propped up onto the wood stove. Her eyes were closed but she was awake, and opened one when she heard Miranda come in.

"What's for dinner?" she wanted to know. Miranda had decided to seize the initiative, and tried.

"Who are you, anyway?" she demanded, as she stalked over and stood right beside her.

"I'm your dear old auntie. Isn't that what you told the policeman? It sounds good to me," and she chuckled.

"You're not my aunt. I'm asking you now, who are you, really?"

"I don't see why you need to know," the old woman replied. "I'm here now, and that's how it is."

"Nothing is what it is," Miranda said for no reason. She didn't even know what she meant. Already the woman had mixed her all up and she couldn't think straight anymore.

"Your grandfather isn't, that's one thing for sure," the old woman mused. "How long's he been gone? My guess is, oh, at least a few months. You've been carrying on on your own. Now how do you do that? There must be some money around here. Am I right?"

Both of her eyes were now opened wide, and staring right into Miranda's. The girl took a step back.

"I don't have any money," she said. "You're some kind of robber, aren't you? Some kind of thief?"

"Everybody needs money," the old woman said, ignoring the rude accusations.

"What I don't get is what you are up to. Most people don't like being alone. Now me, I don't mind. I don't much like people, to tell you the truth. They've never been nothing but trouble to me. Don't you ask. It's none of your business. And you, such a young little girl, and so quiet and good. I'll bet you never caused the old man any trouble. I'll bet you did everything for him, just like maybe you were his wife, or his servant."

"We were partners," Miranda shouted indignantly. "We shared all the work. It wasn't like that!"

"No?" the old woman nodded. "But you definitely said 'was' so I know that I'm right. What happened? Oh, don't tell me. I can see it all in your eyes. Your grandfather died. He just went up and died. Now that wasn't so practical, was it? And him such a practical man."

"What do you know? You don't know anything about it!" Miranda roared. "Now get out of my house and leave me alone, or I swear I'll, I swear you'll regret it."

"Maybe I will, and maybe I won't," Caroline calmly replied. "In any case, I ain't

going nowhere. Now we've settled that, I'll ask one more time. What's for dinner? What have you got?"

"Nothing for you!" Miranda spat. "No work, no food. That's the rule."

"Then I'll work," the old woman shrugged, and began to get up. "I'll make dinner myself if I have to. And while I'm about it, I'll make something for you. Now let's see what you've got around here. This morning I didn't see much."

Miranda stood speechless and hopelessly enraged and she watched the old woman shuffle off to the kitchen.

Chapter Eighteen

Once again Caroline was banging around the cupboards and the small refrigerator, complaining the whole time about how little there was.

"You must eat like a minnow," she proclaimed. "There's barely enough in here to feed a small parakeet."

Nevertheless, she had soon pulled out some eggs and goat cheese, and muttering something about the garden she'd noticed, briskly stepped out and returned with a handful of freshly grown spinach. This she washed in the sink and set to one side.

"Next you're going to tell me you don't have any pie plates. No, don't bother. I can see for myself. But these old pottery bowls over here, they'll have to do. Now, where's your oven. What? You call that an oven?" she scoffed at the small toaster oven perched on the counter.

"That is going to take some real doing," she muttered. By this time Miranda had quietly wandered over, curious as to what the old woman was up to.

"No butter?" Caroline inquired, peeking back at the girl, who shook her head slowly.

"Just vegetable oil? My god, what a ruffian you are."

"Sometimes we have butter," Miranda began to explain, but Caroline interrupted.

"You must be going to that store," she said, "the one that sheriff was talking about. What are they, Carters he said? I know you don't grow your own oil, not to mention this flour," she said, as she grabbed the small bag off its shelf. Miranda sighed deeply, clearly the old woman was going to exhaust her supplies in one go. Before she knew it, her guest was rolling out two small pie

crusts, wrapping them inside the old ceramic bowls, and filling them with a mixture of cheese, eggs and spinach.

"It's a sort of a quiche," the old woman explained. 'Of course if we had some butter it would be a real quiche, but you do what you can."

She popped the two bowls into the small toaster oven and guessed at a setting.

"We'll just have to watch it," she explained, turning around. "Or smell it, more likely, though I can't say I know the odor of perfectly baked goat cheese souffle."

"By the way, someone called while you were out doing whatever it is that you do," she said, standing solid with her hands on her hips as if scolding her own wayward daughter.

"What do you mean?" Miranda was puzzled, then realized she'd left her cellphone plugged in on the loft.

"Some guy," Caroline said, "says he's a lawyer. Says he's involved in a case with your mother. Where is your mother, anyway? How come she's not here?"

"That's none of your business," Miranda huffed, "and it's rude to listen in on other peoples phone calls. Of course you know all about rude."

"I'll forgive you for that," Caroline smiled, revealing those gapped teeth again. "After all, I'm making you dinner. But okay, never mind. You have your secrets. I can see that. I'll just go sit in my chair while our supper is baking."

"It isn't your chair," the girl hopelessly said, but all she could do was stand there and watch as Caroline made herself comfortable. Not even the deliciousness of dinner could dispel Miranda's foul mood, and after giving in once again and making a fire, she silently climbed up into the loft from the bookshelves below, and, muting her phone, lost herself for a while on the internet. Sooner than she'd anticipated, sleep overtook her, and she slept quite easily all through the night.

Chapter Nineteen

Miranda woke up the next morning with one new idea, but she didn't believe it was a very good one. Dropping down from the loft she brought out her cellphone and while the old woman snoozed in the chair she took a few photos of her on the sly. She figured she'd try and find some kind of facial recognition

website where she should could upload the picture and see if it matched any known wanted criminals. She didn't know if there was any such site but if there wasn't there really should be. She snuck out of the house and hurriedly typed in such search terms as she thought might be useful but didn't find anything like what she wanted. All she found was a story in the news that some company was developing technology like that for use by police but not for ordinary people. It didn't seem right. They had all this stuff on the phone but not the one thing she needed desperately now.

She was certain that the woman was some kind of convict, probably escaped from some prison somewhere, and now she was alone on the run and using her place for a hideout. Or, even worse, maybe she wasn't alone but just waiting to bring in her gang, who might be out there in the woods at that moment. Miranda glanced around nervously, but her ears could only pick up the sounds of the early morning birds, and her own animals crying for attention. She put the phone in her pocket and got back to work. As always, there was so much to do and as always, doing it all took her mind off her problems. It was only when she came back from leading the goats to a different field that she entered the barn and found Caroline snooping around inside there.

"What do you want?" Miranda nearly barked at the sight. Caroline turned to face her, and Miranda saw that she'd found the store of canned fruits they always kept in an old wooden cupboard out there. Caroline was holding up a jar.

"It's not labeled," she said.

"It's not yours," Miranda countered. "Put it back."

Caroline shrugged and returned the mason jar to the shelf where it rejoined the dozens of others much like it.

"I was thinking it would go nice with some fresh homemade bread," she said, walking back out towards Miranda. "I could make some, you know, if we only had a couple of things."

"I know how to make bread," Miranda curtly replied, and even as she said it she was mentally making notes to pick up some butter and yeast the next time she went down to the store.

"We should go shopping," the old woman said, coming right up to the girl.

"You should go away," Miranda said, standing her ground. She felt stronger that

morning, and especially in the barn, where she could feel the horses encouraging her, or so she imagined. This was her place even more than the house, because she had worked on everything in it at one time or another. She'd piled up the hay and canned the fruit and cleaned out the stalls and hung up the ropes and the saddles. She'd painted the walls and even patched up the roof. More than anything, the smell of the barn gave her strength. She breathed it in and told Caroline again she should leave, she wasn't needed or wanted around there.

"I made up a list," Caroline said, completely ignoring her rant. "So what do you do, ride the horses down there? Guess you must, it's too far to walk in one day, especially carrying up groceries. And the other thing is, how do you pay?"

"I take them some eggs and some goat cheese and this fudge that we make," Miranda explained, chattering away against her will. She wished again she wasn't so trained to answer old people's questions. It was like she was a circus monkey, she scolded herself.

"So you trade," the old woman nodded, and then shook her head. Clearly she was not satisfied. "I can see that, up to a point," she pondered aloud, "but it can't be enough. And then, of course, there's the cellphone. Somebody's paying for that."

"It's none of your dang business," Miranda yelled. "Why don't you see to your own affairs and leave mine alone?"

Caroline laughed, and had to stop herself from reaching out and patting the little girl on the head. She was so cute when she got upset, the old woman thought. And of course, she admitted to herself, the girl had a point. She was totally right. On the other hand, well, the old woman actually was looking out for herself.

"Tell you what," she said to Miranda, "I'll make you a deal. Room and board, nothing more. I'm not after your cash or your stash or whatever it is that he left you."

"I promise," she quickly added, seeing Miranda about to explode once again, and that seemed to defuse her for a moment.

"I promise," Caroline repeated, holding her palms up and doing her best to look as sincere as she could. "We just need some groceries right now, and that's all. See? I made up a list?"

Slowly she pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket, like a mugging victim might pull out his wallet. She held it up, offering it to Miranda. The girl snorted, then sniffed, then sneered, then finally grabbed the thing out of her hands. She scanned it over and didn't find anything unreasonable on it except for something called 'lemon pepper'.

"What's lemon pepper?" she asked and again kicked herself mentally for caving once more.

"I doubt they even have it," Caroline said, "that store didn't impress me too much when I saw it."

Miranda knew she really ought to go down there. For one thing, Caroline had used up most of the flour for the egg and cheese pies she'd made the night before, and she was tempted by even the thought of fresh homemade bread. It was time. Ever since the sheriff's first visit she'd been holding out, not wanting to venture down there with the Carters asking all sorts of questions about Calvin, so she'd been eating too little and letting her basic supplies run down low.

"I can go by myself," she said, but Caroline insisted on coming, which was confusing to the girl. If Caroline was a fugitive from the law, why would she want to go out in public? Then again, Miranda had to admit, the old lady hadn't hidden from the sheriff the other day either, so maybe that whole escaped prisoner thing was all wrong. It turned out that Caroline also knew how to ride, and saddled up Betty - Calvin's old mount - and rode comfortable alongside the girl once they'd packed up the goods and headed out down the trail. Miranda couldn't help but acknowledge it almost felt like old times, and that wasn't so bad.

Chapter Twenty

Bill Landis was feeling exceptionally lucky. He always felt good when he took his bike out on the road, and the thrill of the chase was roiling his blood around too. He felt in his bones it was murder, and the best kind at that, a murder unsolved, a cold case that nobody else had figured out yet. There was credit to be gained, he'd make a name for himself yet, and there were also the favors of Lucille to acquire. And it was beginning to seem like all he had to do was show up. He didn't know anything about Los Arboles except that it was his destination, the nearest place on the map to one Calvin Harden, old man and suspect numero uno. Why else would he never pick up the phone, or call

back, or answer a letter? The old guy was guilty as sin, and Bill knew it. He'd come across this kind of story before. Half the time there is violence, it's all in the family. Husbands murder their wives. Wives hire someone to knock off their husbands. Sons killing dads and daughters poisoning moms. Abuse is almost always domestic abuse. God forbid there was anything involving the child.

Just show up he did, and the first thing he noticed about the town of Los Arboles was the entire town of Los Arboles. It consisted of a roadside pit stop, one long building on the side of an otherwise moribund mountain highway. The building contained a post office whose hours were set between never and nope, the remains of what was a restaurant once but looked like it had been shuttered for years, and a small country store that was more like the kind of snack shop you'd find in a national park. On the other side of the road was a promising bar with a couple of Harleys outside. Bill felt right at home. The guys there would definitely be admiring his bike by the end of the day. His was a classic, a genuine 1990 Low Rider FXR like you'd see in the movies. It got him attention wherever he went, and that day in Los Arboles was no exception. Right away as he pulled up in front of the store, a young woman came out and stood by admiring. She wasn't exactly his type, but he wasn't picky. "On the road, anything goes," he said to himself.

"That's a beautiful bike," Tara Carter exclaimed as Bill pulled himself up, took off his helmet and shook his wet hair. He'd been riding for hours and needed to stretch.

"That she is," he smiled at her. "Bill Landis," he said introducing himself. He held out his hand and she took it.

"Tara Carter," she replied, "So nice to meet you."

It was so nice to meet him, in fact, that she offered to make him a sandwich and gave him a beer from the case. The store was, as usual, empty. There were hardly ever any customers in there, so the two of them stood around and got to know one another a bit. They made some small talk for a while, and eventually Bill got down to business. He explained that he was a private investigator, looking into a possibly serious crime that might have occurred right around where they were. Tara was intrigued, but when Bill came right out and mentioned his suspicions, she burst out into uncontrollable laughter.

"Calvin?" she sputtered, "old Calvin a cold-blooded killer? Oh my, I don't think

so. Oh no, that can't be. Can it?" she concluded, coming around to the idea of the deadly possibility.

"It sounds like you know him," Bill said.

"Course I do," Tara said, "I've known him my entire life. Everybody around here knows Calvin. You know what they call him? The old man in the trees."

"And you knew his son, too? Dean? And his son's wife, Loretta?"

"But hardly," Tara admitted. "They weren't here long. Just came to give birth to Miranda, is what they all say. Then when they took off, they left her behind with old Calvin. That part's a mystery, true."

"Nobody's ever seen either one of them since," Bill explained, and Tara's face took on a worried expression.

"Is that true? I mean, we heard that she died. Everyone said."

"Did they say how?"

"No, I guess not," Tara confessed, "but it had to be drugs. Overdose or something like that. She was a mess. You should have seen her. I remember I saw her one time, right over there by the door, she could hardly stand up. Kept toppling over. Dean had to keep propping her up and she couldn't speak clearly at all. Had her stringy hair falling all over her face, the poor thing must have weighed seventy pounds, no really, I swear. How she ever had a baby nobody knows. She always wore these huge aviator sunglasses, and clogs, which was one reason why she couldn't barely walk. She looked like death just waiting to happen. Can't say that anyone was surprised when they heard."

"And what about Dean?" Bill wanted to know, but Tara only shrugged. She had no idea. Bill was about to ask for directions up to old Calvin's place but then, it was simply his lucky day. There was no other way to explain it. All he had to do was show up. Here he was, all hot on the trail, and what do you know, the girl walked right in.

Chapter Twenty One

Miranda and Caroline had also noticed the Harley, and had been standing right outside the door, admiring it, Caroline especially. It seemed to bring back old times, and Miranda thought she saw tears come into the old woman's eyes, but she blinked a few times and strode into the store, Miranda a few steps behind her. As soon as she entered, Tara Carter called out.

"Miranda! Miranda. Look, there's somebody here who knows your aunt down in Fresno."

Miranda stopped in her tracks, looking shocked. She had no idea how Tara could know about Lucky or Grace or Lark. It was crazy. Was the entire planet collapsing on her? Did everyone else in the world know her family but her?

"Bill Landis," said a gross-looking, big sweaty man who was suddenly walking right towards her. Miranda backed up, almost stepping outside of the door, but the man stopped and held up his hands.

"I've been trying to contact your grandfather," Landis explained. "I've been calling and leaving him messages. Did he get them?"

Miranda shook her head 'no' but didn't say a word. She quickly glanced around to see who else was there, but saw no one. Caroline had grabbed a small basket and was somewhere in the aisles looking for stuff.

"I don't mean him any harm," Landis explained, which only frightened Miranda even more.

"I'm just here on business, looking into some matters concerning your parents, Loretta and Dean Harden. Do you know where your parents are now?"

Still, Miranda didn't answer. Tara Carter felt she ought to pipe in.

"He's investigating," she said in a voice full of intrigue. "You know how your mom and your dad ain't been seen since you was a baby?" Bill Landis shot her a look which encouraged her to shut up, so she did.

"That's right," he said, in a calm reassuring tone, or so he intended. "It's an official investigation. I'm representing your aunt Lucille. She's a friend of mine. I'm a lawyer and we work at the same firm together. She's concerned about her sister. They were twins, did you know?"

This time Miranda nodded. Again, obeying adults! She was trying to make up her mind to stop doing that.

"She doesn't know what became of her sister. There's no public record. She just disappeared, along with her husband, your father, eleven years ago now. That's why I wanted to talk to your grandfather, find out what he knows. I just want to talk to him. I don't mean him any harm," he repeated.

"He's away," Miranda managed to say, and Tara nodded.

"That's right, I forgot," she told Bill. "My parents had the sheriff go up and

check on him. Said he'd gone down to L.A. for some family business. That right, Miranda?"

"That's right," Miranda said.

"Maybe I can help," Caroline suddenly spoke up. She had come up the aisle and been standing there, listening in. Now she stepped up to Bill and introduced herself boldly.

"I'm Caroline Harden," she said. "Calvin's sister."

"I didn't know he had one," Bill said, suspicious. He had thoroughly researched Calvin's background, and was pretty sure about that. Calvin had two brothers. Marvin and Joseph, one older, one younger. Marvin had lost both his legs in a war and lived in a retirement home out by Denver. Joseph had died of heart failure at the age of fifty seven.

"Half-sister, actually," Caroline back-tracked. "We had different mothers."

Landis nodded, looking thoughtful. It was possible, he had to admit. Calvin's father was known as a roughneck, work on the oil fields, gotten around. It wouldn't be surprising if he'd had more than one family scattered about.

"I can tell you what happened to them," Caroline continued. Landis perked up.

"Would you happen to have any coffee?" she said to Tara. She figured she might as well get something for telling the tale. Tara, who was eager to hear it, hurriedly filled and gave her a cup. Caroline took it, and took her time taking a sip. Then she looked around at her audience. Tara was all ears behind the counter. Miranda was still over by the door looking like she'd fly if she could. Bill Landis was over near Tara. He had taken out a notepad and a pen and was ready to write down whatever she said. Caroline smiled to herself, and began.

"Dean and Loretta were up to no good," she declared. "Never were up to no good. From the start they were nothing but trouble. Dean might have had his good days, but not her. She was a schemer, always coming up with some kind of racket. She'd be selling bad dope, or selling herself if she could. I don't mean to be insulting your mother," she said, looking steadily at Miranda, "but I'm telling the truth."

"I know what she was," Miranda muttered, and Caroline nodded and went on.

"There was nothing that she wouldn't do to get what she wanted. She had no rules, believed in no laws. It was Loretta against the whole world all the time.

Nobody loved her except Dean, and you know what he loved? That she was entirely his."

Caroline laughed as she said it.

"Entirely his and exactly because there was nobody else in the world who would have her. The two of them made quite a pair. Everyone said it was only a matter of time until they got what was coming to them. They made a lot of enemies in their very brief lives, most of that from ripping people off. It seemed like they never met anyone they didn't steal from. Dean was a talker. He could tell you a story, make you believe whatever he said. It was always a lie. Well, long story short, one day they ran out of luck. Went down south of L.A. to the desert. People vanish down there, gone without a trace all the time. It's what happened to them. Tried to make the wrong deal for the very last time."

Caroline stopped, and sighed as if she really gave a damn about them. Landis didn't know what to believe.

"And you know about this, how?" he wanted to know.

"I was there," she replied. "Well, not exactly there when it happened, but there when they took off that day. They'd passed by my place at the time - near where Calvin is now by the way, down south of Blythe - told me they had a big score, couldn't wait to get out there, in Joshua Tree. That was the last time I saw them. Heard the story some time after that, from some biker who'd heard it from somebody else. The man had a hog just like yours. Beautiful thing. Said they were shot in the head, both of them at the same time, together. Never saw it coming. Never felt a thing."

She looked at Miranda again, who was chewing her lower lip, considering the words. Calvin had never told her this tale. He'd never said much about it in fact, only that her mother had died, and that she didn't have to worry about her father ever again. If it ever came up, and it hardly ever did, he'd say the same thing every time, word for word. All this was brand new to her.

"Joshua Tree, you say," Bill Landis considered. "Would you mind giving me Calvin's address, where he is at the moment, I mean."

"I'm afraid I can't say for sure if he's there," Caroline said, but she gave him an address anyway.

"Is there anything else you can tell me?" Landis asked after a time which he'd

spent trying to catch up with her story and writing it all down in his notepad. "That's all I know," she replied, and brought up her basket to Tara. She'd already gathered everything on her list. While Tara was adding it up, Miranda went back out and brought back the bag of eggs, fudge and cheese that she'd brought. Without even considering that Caroline was standing right there, she pulled out the red debit card to pay the bill, and didn't notice Caroline's grin of approval.

They said their goodbyes to Tara and Bill, who were already making plans for later that night. Miranda and Caroline loaded up the saddlebags, mounted the horses and made their way back to the fire road. Neither one said a word for some time. Finally, Miranda couldn't keep quiet any longer.

"Was any of that story true?"

Caroline didn't answer right off.

"I know you're not Calvin's sister," Miranda said. "He never had any sisters. He would have told me if he had."

"Well, that part was half-true," Caroline said, turning to her. "Your grandfather and I did have different mothers. We also had different fathers as well."

She burst into a laugh that was so full of joy that Miranda couldn't help joining in, once again going along with the old folk, but this time it just felt so good.

THE END