

The Sun

a Mystery

by

Courtney White

(vol. 1 of the Sun Ranch Saga)



Santa Fe, New Mexico

To my family

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“The care of the Earth is our most ancient and most worthy and, after all, our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it and foster its renewal is our only hope.”

– Wendell Berry

Monday

Dr. Bryce Miller hated making wrong turns and by the time she reached the ranch foreman's little house she had made three.

She developed a nose for directions at an early age, much to her father's exasperation, mostly because he was forever taking the incorrect street over her protests. "Precocious," he called her once after she untangled a complicated set of his wrong turns while visiting New York City on a rare family vacation. She took it as a compliment. Years later, she astonished a boyfriend by marching him right across Venice to their hotel using only a paper map even though she had never before stepped foot in the famous sinking city. Finding her way around became a point of pride, especially when navigating the labyrinths of unfamiliar hospitals. Once, she had the nerve to gently correct the trajectory of a conceited, highly accomplished colleague who had turned into the wrong hall in his own medical clinic, earning veiled expressions of outrage from his acolytes in tow. To everyone's surprise the famous physician took the correction gracefully, prompting a small, mental fist-pump on her part.

This morning, however, she made three wrong turns in a span of fifteen minutes, two at forks in the ranch entrance road and the third when she mistakenly turned onto the paved driveway that led to her uncle's home. The last one irked her. Did she do it to be on asphalt again? Was she that much of a city girl? The dusty road wasn't rough, just unfamiliar, as was almost everything on the three-hour drive north from the airport in Albuquerque. A native Bostonian, she had visited the Southwest a few times, mostly for medical conferences, but this was her first trip to New Mexico. Perhaps the long drive made her impatient. A similar journey back home would have taken her across three state lines by now! Besides, driving wasn't her thing. She decided early in life to avoid sitting behind a wheel as much as possible, partly out of a sense of environmental responsibility but also because she hated traffic. Specifically, she hated getting *stuck* in traffic and for the same reason she hated making wrong turns: she had work to do. "Life is short and getting shorter," her father liked to say, needling her affectionately. It was also his cheeky way of pushing back against the world's nonstop madness.

Of course, he didn't make that joke anymore.

Despite the wrong turn Bryce kept driving, curious to see her uncle's home. The driveway entered a stand of trees before looping upward steeply, climbing a hill. Rounding a

bend, the car exited the woods, arriving dramatically in front of the house. She couldn't stifle a gasp. Stunning views radiated outward in three directions across the ranch. She let the car drift to a stop at the edge of the parking area, killed the engine, and lowered the tinted passenger window. Grasslands stretched away like a stilled sea, interrupted only by small islands of trees looking like they had become unmoored from a nearby forest and drifted across the green vastness. To the north, she spied the Alameda River, which she had crossed on the entrance road, meandering eastward across the ranch toward the plains. In the distance beyond the river loomed a long band of flat-topped hills and above them a dark mass of forested mountains, looking like a lost continent, she thought. Her gaze dropped back to the green sea. On the drive from the airport, she had been mesmerized by the rich colors of the high desert, full of yellows, browns, and purple-reds, but this was different.

This was grass country.

Bryce followed the vista west through the windshield. A belt of tree-dotted foothills rose purposefully until they became forests and mountains, split by a deep canyon from which the Alameda River emerged. Snow glistened on tall peaks on the horizon. She leaned forward and stared upward. The sky was piercingly blue and vast, speckled with puffball clouds. It was so close she felt like she could touch it. She never felt that way about the sky in Boston, a consequence of sea salt in the air, she supposed. Here, the sky was pure crystal. It felt like an image from a dream. Or a mirage. No wonder her uncle picked this spot for his home – the view alone was worth the fortune he had spent!

Lowering the driver's window, she studied the house. It looked like a fancy version of a Lincoln Log cabin she built once as a child. It was a square, two-story structure built with golden-brown logs, topped by a steep roof and a stone chimney. A short, handsome wooden stairway led to a porch and a front door flanked by two large windows. The roof extended over the porch, supported by four wooden posts. To the right, on the north side of the house, was an observation deck. She could see patio furniture and a huge BBQ grill sitting near a railing. The parking area appeared to continue around the corner of the elevated deck, following the curve of the hill. There was a hot tub somewhere, Bryce remembered, as well as a Swedish sauna, a small gym, and a large wine cellar – not things one normally found on a working cattle ranch, she suspected.

A light breeze tickled her face, carrying hints of grass and earth. As she took a deep breath, a tingle ran down to her toes. Why did that smell seem so familiar? She had never visited a ranch in her life. She stopped at a dairy farm in Vermont once out of curiosity. It was pretty, she recalled, but smelly. A few years ago, she drove from Chicago to St. Louis to visit a college chum, slicing through farm country, but all she saw were rows of green corn as high as the car. That was the extent of her agricultural experience. True, her mother and uncle had been raised on a farm in Nebraska, but her grandparents sold the property shortly after Bryce was born and retired to Florida. Neither one of their children wanted to farm. Bryce's mother moved to Boston to attend college, married her father, an impertinent high school science teacher, and became an accountant. Bryce's uncle went west and grew rich. When her mother became ill a few years ago, Bryce broached the idea of visiting the family homestead, but she refused and the subject wasn't mentioned again. She closed her eyes as the fragrant breeze tickled her face. The air was incredibly dry. Bryce heard chattering bird sounds in the trees behind her uncle's house. Why did she feel so at home here, thousands of miles from her deeply urban life, six thousand feet high under electric blue skies?

Bryce's phone rang suddenly in the fleece vest she wore, breaking her reverie. She glanced at the rental's clock as she pulled the phone from a pocket, hoping the call came from the ranch foreman, Matt Harris, who she was due to meet right now. Instead, the call came from a medical colleague, undoubtedly wondering if she had time to discuss another urgent case. She smiled wanly at the phone. Her crazy life followed her like a bloodhound. It didn't matter if she sat in a rental on a remote ranch in New Mexico or went surfing on her occasional week off. On the drive from the airport, she answered a dozen calls, including one that required a quick exit from the freeway so she could concentrate on the conversation. Frankly, the good cell coverage surprised her – maybe she expected more primitive conditions in New Mexico? She hated thinking that, though she felt relieved when the signal finally faded away as she drove past Santa Fe.

Wait. There was a strong signal here! Bryce tapped the foreman's number and held the phone to her ear as it rang. Hopefully, he was waiting at his house as planned. He had called her last week anxious to talk as soon as she arrived at the ranch, though he wouldn't say what it was about. It sounded important. Over the years, she learned to read voices like she could read faces and the foreman sounded agitated. Was he worried about losing his job? Why had he been so

guarded on the phone? And why did he insist on meeting at his house and not at her uncle's? That seemed odd, though life was full of little mysteries. There was a click. An answering machine came on. "Hi, this is Matt..." the message began. She lowered the phone. Why hadn't he picked up? Maybe there was a ranch emergency – some cow thing. If so, why didn't he leave her a message?

Bryce tapped the phone off with a finger and returned it to her vest.

She started up the car and turned around in the parking area slowly, giving the grass sea another look. It flowed endlessly to the eastern horizon. What was her uncle up to here? She knew he had purchased a large ranch called The Sun four years ago, in 2004, with the profits from the sale of his successful marketing firm in the Bay Area. Assuming it was an investment, it surprised Bryce to learn he moved to the ranch lock-stock-and-barrel almost immediately. What possessed him to abandon the bustle and sophistication of San Francisco, where he lived for decades, for a lovely backwater like New Mexico? Was it a Wild West thing? She imagined him in a cowboy hat. It was possible. Although she had only met her uncle eight or nine times over the years, she knew he possessed an eccentric streak, as well as a killer instinct for making money. She also knew he had died suddenly, unmarried and childless, while staying at a winery in France, leaving his extended family to speculate about the fate of his valuable ranch.

But why in the world had he willed it to *her*?

At the bottom of the hill, Bryce guided the car back onto the dirt road. At a fork, she spied a weathered sign low to the ground. *Headquarters* it said simply, pointing right. Following it, she casually wondered where her uncle's cattle were – off in a field probably. The large herd came with the ranch and the smug probate lawyer told her the animals were almost as valuable as the house. When she expressed skepticism – they were talking about *cows* after all – he handed her the valuation sheet. She nearly stopped breathing. Looking up, she saw a smirk on the lawyer's face. There was more. What she didn't inherit, he said slowly for effect, was a mortgage – on anything. Her uncle paid cash for the land, house, animals, and everything else, which made her wonder what he did out there in California to earn so much money. Clearly, he was shrewder than people gave him credit and buying a 140,000-acre ranch may have been his best move of all, though she suspected dying early wasn't part of his plans. The upshot, said the lawyer, was that the ranch was hers, free and clear except for taxes and fees. Toss in cash from a bank

account for the ranch's operation and here's what the inheritance is worth. He handed her another piece of paper.

She took one look and nearly fell out of her chair.

Bryce could see a cluster of buildings under two rows of tall trees up ahead, looking like a leafy oasis in the sea of grass. Headquarters, had to be. The foreman's house should be the first building on the right she recalled from a map. She slowed the car as she approached a small brown house. Near it stood a tall windmill, its heavy gray blades making a screeching sound as they turned slowly. It looked like it came straight from a western movie, Bryce thought – or a museum. Behind the house was what appeared to be a corral. What really caught her eye, however, was the silver pickup truck parked in the driveway. The foreman was home! She parked behind the truck and pushed up her sunglasses as she stepped out of the car to get a better look at the house. It was a simple, cinder-block thing fronted by a white fence. Behind a gate sat a small, thirsty-looking lawn. It was late May – shouldn't the grass be greener? She waited. Where was the foreman? Napping? She honked the rental's horn, surprising herself at its loudness in the quiet air. Nothing. She walked to the gate in the fence, opened it, and crossed to the front door. She knocked once and waited. The windmill screeched again. She knocked a second time.

“Mister Harris?” she called loudly. “It's Bryce Miller.”

Nothing. Feeling slightly annoyed now, she cupped her face with her hands and peered through the living room window, whose curtains were partially open. Dimly, she saw a light-colored sofa, a stuffed chair, and a pair of mostly empty bookcases against a far wall. There was carpeting and possibly a stereo system on a wooden console, though she couldn't be certain. A laptop sat on a coffee table in front of the chair. She could see a closed door in a hallway and what looked like the entrance to the kitchen.

No foreman.

Bryce pulled her phone from the vest pocket, but there was no signal at all. Maybe he was out back. She crossed back through the gate, leaving it open, and turned to her right. Rounding the corner of the house, she had to side-step a rain barrel that had fallen over. Behind the building was a miserly backyard with two neglected-looking trees and a peeling bird bath. She noticed a pile of cigarette butts near the back door. No foreman. She crossed to the corral. It was empty except for piles of horse poop. There was a small wooden structure at one end of the

corral, probably for horse stuff. Its door was padlocked. Bryce folded her arms across her chest in frustration. Where was he? Uncertain if she should continue to feel annoyed or begin to feel worried, Bryce turned a half-circle, peering around. The silver pickup sat quietly in the driveway. Something didn't feel right. She decided to hold her breath and listen. Other than the screeching windmill and a few distant bird calls, everything was so... quiet. There was no background noise, she suddenly realized. The steady urban hubbub that she had known all her life was gone.

At the sound of another metallic screech, Bryce walked toward the windmill, shading her eyes against the bright sky as she traced a spindly metal ladder to its top, not entirely sure why she thought the foreman might be up there. He wasn't. Was there an outhouse? She surveyed the grounds. No. Indoor plumbing, right. Perhaps the pickup in the driveway didn't belong to him after all. Maybe the foreman was busy at one of the other Headquarters buildings. Maybe they had a more relaxed attitude toward keeping appointments here in the country. Perplexed, she began walking back to her car. She glanced at the silver pickup as she walked past.

A dog suddenly lunged at her from the bed of the pickup, snarling and snapping its jaws. Bryce recoiled, tripping over a tree branch that lay incautiously along the side of the driveway. She recovered quickly and spun around athletically, but the dog had disappeared, no doubt lurking in the truck's bed waiting to attack again. She could feel her heart beating fast. She approached the pickup cautiously, rising a bit on her toes in order to peer into the bed without getting too close. It was empty at first. Then she saw a black tail followed by a black-and-white body, then a head, pointy ears and brown eyes. Reflexively, she pulled back, but the dog didn't attack. She peeked again. The dog stared back.

Its eyes were sad.

She leaned closer, ready to jump at the slightest twitch of the animal's muscles. Growing up, she had always wanted a dog but they were strictly forbidden by her mother who considered them to be too much like farm animals, preferring fat, lazy cats instead. In college, Bryce intended to visit the shelter to find a canine companion (the human varieties weren't working out so well) but never quite found the time. Then came the crush of medical school, where it was almost impossible to take care of herself much less a pet, followed by a highly coveted residency at a major research hospital in New York City, another round-the-clock commitment. Hard on its heels came the big job – the same job she held today as a pediatric oncologist at a major hospital

back home in Boston. She settled into a brutal routine with the occasional week off which she used to go surfing someplace tropical to dissipate stress and recover her sanity.

No time for dogs, as it turned out.

She smiled at the baleful animal in the truck. “Hey there,” she said soothingly. “Why the sad eyes?” It didn’t move. “Where’s your person? Did they go away somewhere?”

The dog continued to stare at her.

“Are you hungry? You look hungry.”

To her surprise, the dog wagged its tail – but just once.

“Well, that’s progress. What’s your name? Are you a him or a her?” she asked, trying to see under the dog, but without success. “Who do you belong to?”

The dog stared back – but less sadly now, she thought.

“Do you know where the foreman is? Mister Harris?”

The dog wagged its tail again, twice this time.

Bryce peered through the open passenger window into the cab. She saw a travel mug in a cup holder, a water bottle next to it, a pair of work gloves on the passenger seat, and a magazine on the floor with a cow on its cover. Did that mean the truck belonged to the foreman? Maybe everyone here had cow magazines. There was a CD on the seat next to the gloves. She reached through the window and picked it up. *Loyal Brigand*. Hard jazz. Not what she expected a ranch foreman to listen to, but you never knew. She dropped the CD back on the seat and pushed off from the pickup with both hands as if she were in a small boat leaving the dock. Maybe she was supposed to meet him at one of the other buildings? She climbed into the rental, shutting the door harder than she planned. The dog appeared in the back of the pickup, his ears alert. Bryce gave him a wave, but he vanished again.

She swung the car back onto the road and drove slowly through the Headquarters looking for a sign of the foreman, or anyone, in the leafy oasis. On her left, she saw a brown, rambling, one-story building, looking historic. A sign stuck in the ground said *Office*. Next to the house, a sprinkler sat quietly in the middle of a large lawn. A trampoline stood beyond it, waiting for children. A hammock hung motionless between two tall trees. Beyond the lawn, grasslands. On the right, she passed a double-door maintenance facility of some sort, looking new. Its doors were closed tight. A yellow tractor sat passively beside it, near a pile of large rocks. As the building slid by, she caught a glimpse of three tall, cylindrical containers on thin metal legs

behind it. Hoses hung down from each one. There were other structures, including what Bryce suspected was a barn, but they began to blur together.

A little farther on, as the canopy of trees began to thin out, she spied a short road on the right leading to a large circular structure. It reminded her of the corral back at the little house. It was empty as well. On the left, under the last row of trees, was a trailer. It was long and narrow, its silver metallic hide pocked at regular intervals with windows, each closed with curtains. A solitary door occupied its middle, connected to the ground by a short stair. She slowed down. There was evidence of tire tracks in the semi-circular driveway, she thought, but no vehicles. It looked lifeless.

A small chill tingled her spine.

Bryce hit the brakes, stopping the car in the middle of the road. She had reached the edge of the sea of grass and didn't feel like venturing any farther in fear of getting lost. She drummed her fingers impatiently on the steering wheel. Where was the foreman? Did he forget their meeting? Unlikely. She pulled her phone from her vest but it still utterly lacked a signal. She tossed it onto the passenger seat in exasperation. Honestly! What sort of foreman skipped appointments? The missing kind. The chill returned. She pushed it away, feeling faintly ridiculous. They had crossed wires somehow, that's all. She decided to go back to her uncle's house – maybe he went looking for her there.

Bryce tugged on the steering wheel and stepped smartly on the gas, forcing the car into a tight U-turn, tires crunching loudly on the gravel. She had miscalculated. The car rocked side-to-side violently as it left the road, tossing Bryce around in her seat. The steering wheel slipped from her hands briefly. The wheels made a straining sound in the grassy dirt and the car slowed to a crawl. She prayed it wouldn't get stuck! Fortunately, the vehicle kept going but rocked again as it reentered the roadway. Finally, everything settled down. Bryce took a deep breath as she gripped the steering wheel firmly.

No more wrong turns, she promised herself.

The foreman wasn't waiting at her uncle's house.

After parking, Bryce fished her phone from the passenger well, where it had fallen during her little driving adventure, but none of the messages waiting were from him. She tapped the foreman's phone number only to be rewarded a few moments later with the click of the answering machine. "Hi, this is Matt..." She sighed and turned the phone off clumsily, still uncomfortable with these new-fangled touch screen devices. She missed her well-worn Blackberry. She reluctantly made the switch last year only because her father gave her the new phone for her thirty-fifth birthday. He was always doing things like that. An early and enthusiastic tech head, he had an uncanny nose for spotting trends before others. Years ago, he was the first person on their block in South Boston to bring home a pocket calculator, causing her frugal mother to grumble at its cost (though she quickly began using it for work). When Bryce was thirteen, he surprised the three of them by bringing home a personal computer – a shiny Apple II – changing their lives forever. Predictably, her mother declared the machine an indulgence they couldn't afford. Her father gave Bryce a wry smile. "What good is an indulgence if you can't afford it!" he protested. Then he winked at her.

Life was short.

Maybe the foreman had left her a note. Getting out of the car, Bryce climbed the brief flight of stairs to the front door. No note. She turned to her right and walked along the porch to the observation deck, connected at the corner of the house by an archway. Stepping onto the spacious wooden deck, she saw a sliding glass door to her left that led inside. There was no note stuck to it either. She walked to the center of the rectangular deck. The eight-chair patio set and the large BBQ grill looked expensive, she thought. In the far corner was an elevated hot tub. A peek inside revealed it to be dry. *Where was the foreman?* Frowning now, Bryce punched his number again and lifted the phone to her ear as she walked toward the railing. She suddenly spied a vehicle traveling toward her on the entrance road, trailing a long plume of dust. She shaded her eyes against the bright sunlight. It looked like a pickup. Finally, the foreman! Wait. What about the truck at the little house? Maybe this was someone else. There was another ranch employee, as she recalled. The answering machine kicked in. "Hi, this is Matt," she heard again. His voice was calm compared to the conversation she had with him last week. "I'm not available at the moment, but thanks for calling. Please leave a message at the..."

Bryce stabbed her phone with a finger, ending the call, feeling more worried than annoyed now. Maybe he couldn't answer because he was driving the truck. Reaching the railing,

she saw another wooden stairway, narrower and steeper, heading down to a second parking area just around the corner from where she had left the car. She lifted her eyes to the entrance road, shading her face once more. The approaching truck appeared to be in no rush. She felt like waving to catch the driver's attention and speed things up a bit, but she decided to wait instead. She took a deep breath. The wide grasslands in front of her made it feel like she stood at the prow of a golden boat in a vast green sea. It was a comparison that came easily. Her father had been a sailor nearly all his life. As a teenager growing up near the ocean, he saved enough money from his many odd jobs to buy a used but sturdy catamaran which he sailed energetically during his meager spare time. There was something about the sea that grabbed him by the throat and never let go. Even the political turmoil of his college years, followed by his hectic life as a public school teacher, never deterred him from finding time to sail his beloved boat. He felt at home on the water, a feeling he eagerly shared with Bryce, who just as eagerly soaked it up. She learned her life-long love of maps from him. She could remember the excitement she felt when her father spread a new nautical chart across the dining room table. They would pour over the map together, their fingers hunting among inlets and islands, making plans. She loved to watch her father during these moments, his eyes sparkling with possibility. Of course, the irony was incredible. Why was he such a wizard on water but so incompetent with directions on land?

It was a mystery.

A white pickup truck suddenly emerged from the woods on the driveway. Bryce crossed the deck and headed down the porch toward the front door. As the truck pulled into the parking area, she could see an older man behind the wheel, debonair in a trim beard, a grey cowboy hat, and a blue kerchief around his neck. His hands held the wheel comfortably, she noticed, as if the vehicle were an old friend. He sat erectly, which in her experience meant he had either served in the military or grew up in a family that valued good posture. Parking next to her car, he opened the truck door and climbed out stiffly. He wore brown boots, jeans, a large belt buckle, and a plaid, snap-button shirt with the sleeves down. He was lean and white-haired. As she reached the bottom of the porch stairs, Bryce could see that his face was smooth above his beard, though by the look of his weathered hands he had to be seventy. He had lively blue eyes in an otherwise serious face, suggesting he was mischievous or stubborn – or both.

“Doctor Miller, I presume?” he said in a courtly twang. He stuck out a hand. “Earl Holcombe. Welcome to The Sun. It's a pleasure to meet you.”

She gripped his hand firmly. “Nice to meet you too.”

“I’m your neighbor to the south, one of them anyway. The Rafter T Ranch. It’s just a little, bitty place compared to this operation,” he said, nodding at the vista. “I was sorry to hear about your uncle.”

“Thank you. It was a shock to everyone.”

“I bet. Hoo boy,” he said, shaking his head.

He was sizing her up, she knew from experience with older male doctors, so she stood her ground confidently in her casual but upscale outdoor clothing, a pair of trendy sunglasses sitting comfortably on top of her well-cut short hair, feeling every inch the urban-dwelling, New York Times-reading, latte-drinking, East Coast liberal that she appeared to be – and was.

“Did you know you’d be inheriting the ranch?” he asked.

“Not a clue.” Her phone suddenly rang in her vest pocket. “Sorry,” she said, pulling it out. After a glance at the number, she silenced the ring. “I thought it might be the foreman.”

“Matt?”

“He called me last week. He wanted to meet at his house as soon as I got to the ranch, but he isn’t home. I saw a truck in the driveway though.”

“Silver? That’s his,” Earl said. “Did you see the quad? It’s a four-wheeler. He uses it to check on cattle and fix fences.”

Bryce shook her head. “No, I didn’t see anything like that.”

“He’s been having trouble with a well in the south pasture. Maybe he needed to run down there.”

“Does he own a horse?”

“Yes ma’am,” Earl replied with a nod. “Brunhilda. She’s quite a gal.”

“The horse wasn’t there either.”

Earl wrinkled his eyes at her. “Not there? That’s odd. He doesn’t usually use her for ranch work. Were there any other trucks?”

“I didn’t see any.”

“Well, I’m sure there’s a logical explanation. Matt’s as good as they come. Did he tell you what he wanted to talk about?”

“No. But he sounded anxious. You have any idea?”

“No ma’am. I know he’s worried about his brother, who’s a Marine over there in Iraq. Went in as part of the surge last year. But he’s not going to bother you about that.”

Which was eminently alright with her. In March, she attended a peace rally on Boston Common to mark the fifth anniversary of the start of the never-ending Iraq War but it had turned ugly when a small gang of pro-war antagonists crashed their quiet protest causing bad feelings all around. It was a sign of the times, she supposed.

Earl nodded his head approvingly. “That’s a good fight, I’ll tell you.”

Not wanting to be discourteous, Bryce decided to change the subject. She glanced up the entrance road. “I’m curious, how did you know I was here? I didn’t tell anyone I was flying out except the foreman.”

“He told me,” Earl replied. “And I knew you had arrived because of the sensor on the main gate. Your uncle had it installed so he could tell when someone came on the ranch. He insisted it buzz at my house too. And he put up a surveillance camera.”

Bryce frowned. “A camera? Why?”

“No idea. Maybe your uncle was worried about all that wine in his cellar.” Earl shook his head. “You a wine fancier?”

“Only when I’m not too tired,” she replied with a smile.

“I hear you,” he said, chuckling. “I did some research on you last night, by the way. That’s an impressive list of credentials. You’re a children’s doctor?”

“That’s correct,” she said, knowing what was coming next.

“Bone cancer,” he said admiringly. “That’s got to be tough.”

It was a familiar compliment. “Some days it is,” she said quietly, not knowing what else to say.

Earl took the hint. “Did you know your uncle well?”

“I didn’t know him at all,” she replied. “Well, hardly. I met him maybe ten times, mostly while growing up. He and my mother were twins, but we lived in Boston and he lived on the West Coast. I knew he bought a big ranch in New Mexico though.” She turned her head to study the sweeping view. “This place is amazing.”

“She’s a beaut alright. One of the last of the old frontier ranches,” Earl said following her gaze. “Do you know your plans yet?”

“I do,” she said firmly, still surveying the vista. “I’m going to sell it.”

“In that case, here comes your first suitor.”

He nodded at the entrance road where she could see a large red SUV traveling fast toward them, a dust plume rising high into the sky.

“That’s Doreen,” he said, squinting. “She sells big real estate. Watch out, she’s something else too. There’s another one,” he said, nodding at a white truck on the road, not far behind. “That would be Bill Merrill. Smoothest talking SOB in a cowboy hat I ever met.”

“It’s Memorial Day. How do they know I’m even here?”

Earl chuckled. “I think they spy on each other. Here comes someone else!”

He nodded at a shiny sedan speeding behind the other two.

“Who’s that?” Bryce asked.

“Frank McBride, I bet. He works for Nature Unlimited, that big national outfit that buys land for conservation. Their office is in Santa Fe so I wonder what he’s doing here.” Earl pointed. “Here comes a fourth one!”

A black vehicle emerged from the dust behind the sedan, moving at a slower rate. All four vehicles were now filling the air with a great deal of dust.

“What’s going on?” she asked, amazed.

Earl’s eyes twinkled at her. “It’s The Sun, my dear. You have it and they want it. And I suspect they’ll do anything to get it too.”

Bryce watched the four vehicles race down the road. “Mr. Holcombe, do you have any idea why my uncle willed me the ranch?”

“No ma’am. He and I talked a lot about his plans, but not that.”

“You knew him then?”

“I helped him get started here,” Earl said. “He didn’t know which end of a cow got up first. Fortunately, he hired Matt. Your uncle was an odd duck, as anyone around here can tell you. But I liked him and we got along even though he was a Democrat.”

“I’m a Democrat,” she protested.

“And that’s fine,” Earl said with a nod. “I won’t hold it against you either.”

Bryce laughed easily. A moment later, she returned her attention to the oncoming vehicles.

“I was sorry to hear about your mother as well,” Earl said solemnly.

Bryce was silent. “Thank you,” she said finally.

“Your uncle didn’t seem the same after he came back from her funeral. You said they were twins. They must have been close.”

“Not really. I think they had some sort of falling out.” She turned to him. “That’s why this is all so strange. Other than her funeral, the last time I saw my uncle was during a trip I took to the Bay Area five years ago. We had lunch and chatted. And now this.”

She indicted the sprawling grasslands.

“He must have seen something in you,” Earl said.

“I don’t know what.” She gave him a look. “Which end of a cow gets up first?”

Earl chuckled. “You’re going to have to figure that out for yourself.” He nodded at the vehicles, now approaching the hill. “Want any background on your suitors?”

“Please.”

“Alright. Doreen in front represents a developer who wants to build two golf courses on your ranch, one there, and one there,” Earl said, pointing. “Plus a mess of fancy homes in between. I’ve seen the plans. Hoo boy. The developer’s got the support of the Mayor and the Alameda town council, just so you know. Most of them, anyway.”

Bryce nodded.

“Bill in the white truck,” Earl continued, “he’s oil-and-gas. They’ve got a bunch of wells to the east of you. Something called hydraulic fracturing. Apparently, it’s a new way of getting at gas deposits. I guess that means there’s one here on The Sun. Anyway, he’s got the backing of our county commissioners. He’s going to tell you we can get along with industry, but don’t believe a word of it.”

“Don’t worry. What about the other two?”

“Frank, the Nature Unlimited feller, can be a bit touchy. Your uncle outbid them for the ranch and he’s been sore about it ever since. I think he wanted your uncle to will The Sun to them, so he might doubly grouchy.” Earl looked at her. “His outfit is not a fan of cattle, by the way, despite what they say. Word is they want to put bison out here.”

“Is that bad?”

“To cattle ranchers it is,” he replied. “I can’t quite tell who the fourth feller is, but it’s likely Mr. Nibble, as he’s called. The electronic book things? Don’t ask me. I think his real name is Kenneth or Keith. The owner of the company he works for has more money than God and bought all the land north of you.”

He nodded at the dark escarpment and the forested hills lurking above it.

“Used to be the old Circle A, but he combined it with a couple of other ranches and renamed the entire outfit the Diamond Bar. No one knows what he’s up to,” Earl said, his tone taking on an edge of warning. “But I can tell you his property is shaped like half a donut and the Sun is the hole in the middle.”

After giving Bryce a knowing nod, Earl redirected his gaze to the road just as Doreen’s SUV disappeared below the hill, followed shortly by the white truck.

He turned back to her. “Your uncle had a different vision for The Sun, which I guess he didn’t share. He wanted it to be a model ranch. Healthy land, healthy food. I liked it and we talked about it a great deal, at least until he’d get going on one of his liberal rants about climate change or something and that would be the end of the conversation.” Earl shook his head. “Maybe he thought you’d keep his vision going.”

Bryce was silent for a moment. “Not possible, I’m afraid. Is there anyone else? What about you? You want to buy this place?”

Earl’s eyes widened. “The Sun? Absolutely. But you know what it’s worth. You can’t do that with cattle, not anymore, and cattle’s all I got.”

Doreen’s SUV burst suddenly from the woods. It came to a hard stop next to Earl’s truck in the parking area. It was followed closely by the white truck. The other vehicles appeared in short order, parking smartly. Doors opened and people climbed out, the air thick with competition.

Earl caught Bryce’s eye. He chuckled. “This should be fun.”

Doreen rushed at them wearing a flowing red dress over a plump frame with big, unnaturally dark hair and maybe too much make-up on her round face, Bryce thought. She wore embroidered cowboy boots on her feet, a heavy silver Navajo concho belt around her middle, an ornate silver necklace, and multiple silver bracelets, looking like the model in the airline magazine ad for New Mexico that Bryce had read on the flight out. Her eyes were different, however. They had the hungry look of a carnivore.

“Doctor Miller! My name is Doreen Wainwright, it’s so nice to meet you,” she said in a noticeable southern accent as she thrust a business card into Bryce’s hand. “I tried to give you a call last week.”

“Nice to meet you too. Sorry. I’m hard to reach when I’m working.”

“Such an important job too,” Doreen said unctuously. “Taking care of kids with all those cancers. Must be so fulfilling. My heart goes out to them.”

Her smile vanished. “Hello, Earl,” she said, her voice dripping with disdain.

“Ma’am,” he said, touching his hat.

“How long are you here?” she asked Bryce.

“Until Sunday. It’s my week off.”

“You go surfing normally,” Doreen said. “What fun! You took second place at Waikiki last year in that amateur contest. You would have won too if someone hadn’t hidden your board and caused that time delay. It was probably that brute Manolo. He’s always doing things like that, stretching the rules, probably sleeping with the judges. I did a little research.”

“I guess you did,” Bryce replied, blinking.

Doreen cast an evil eye over at Bill Merrill who had reached them. Bryce noticed he also held a business card in his hand.

“I have the perfect client for you,” Doreen said to her. “His name is Mark Sampson. He pulled himself up by his bootstraps just like you and has an incredible vision for this beautiful ranch.” She glanced at Bill. “And by that I mean real jobs for real families.”

“Real jobs driving golf carts and flipping burgers at the country club, you mean,” Bill said smartly. “Allow me to introduce myself. Bill Merrill.”

He handed Bryce a business card. *Alpine Services. Working For Tomorrow Today*. He wore boots, jeans, a big buckle on his belt, a bolo tie around his thick neck, and a white cowboy hat on his head. None of his clothes had a speck of dirt, Bryce noticed. He had an open face, blue eyes that sparkled, and very white teeth. Underneath his cheery exterior, however, was a cockiness that signaled a man used to getting his way.

Bryce turned to Doreen. “Mr. Sampson wants to build a country club here?”

“Just a small one,” Doreen replied. “He’s very community-minded. Children! Lots of them will be living here. Think of the fresh air they’ll have!”

“Ask her how many homes they plan to build,” Bill said.

“Just a hundred,” Doreen said smoothly. “They’ll be done very respectfully. He’s ecologically-minded.”

“That’s just Phase One,” Bill said.

“There’s a Phase Two?” Bryce asked, alarmed.

“He’d rather see a bunch of oil wells,” Doreen snapped, nodding at Bill.

“You’ll hardly know we’re here,” Bill replied.

“Until there’s a spill,” announced Frank McBride, who had arrived. “Or the local water supply becomes contaminated.”

“We have an outstanding safety record, Doctor Miller,” Bill said calmly.

“If you don’t include the accident in Canada that sickened three hundred people,” Frank countered.

“I heard about that accident!” Bryce said, alarmed again.

“That wasn’t us,” Bill said defensively.

“Does it matter?” asked Frank, an edge to his voice.

“We provide good paying jobs,” Bill said smoothly to Bryce.

“We’re building homes for families,” Doreen interjected.

“Full of cats and dogs,” Frank said. “Studies show cats are the number one menace to songbirds. They’re furry murderers.”

“What a terrible thing to say about someone’s pet!” Doreen exclaimed.

Frank shrugged. “At least they keep the coyote population well fed.”

“This is getting good,” Earl said, chuckling.

Frank extended a card. “Frank McBride. Nature Unlimited.” He was tall, thin, tanned, and neatly bearded with intense brown eyes. He wore hiking boots, tidy beige slacks with a belt, and a green, golf shirt with a *Nature Unlimited* logo on the breast. The neat, dark hair on his head, unprotected by a hat, sported a subtle shine, as if glistened lightly with gel.

“Did you know,” Frank continued, “that The Sun is home to an endangered fish? It’s called the Alameda chub. It looks a little bit like a trout. Unfortunately, its habitat has been reduced ninety-five percent in the grasslands around here, thanks mainly to oil-and-gas development.” He directed a slight nod of his head at Bill.

“So why then does your organization want to put buffalo out here?” Bill replied. “Won’t they step on the fish?”

“They’re called bison,” replied Frank, sounding as if he’s had this conversation too many times before. “They don’t step on fish.”

“Don’t you environmentalists say cattle step on fish?” Bill countered.

“Some make that claim, yes.” Frank replied tersely.

“I guess buffalo are more careful,” Bill said to Bryce, almost winking.

Earl chuckled again.

“I greatly admire the research work you’re doing with children,” Bill continued, efficiently changing the subject now that he held the stage. “The daughter of a colleague of mine has osteosarcoma, which is one of your specialties if I’m not mistaken. She’s in a clinical trial at the Stimson Hospital in Dallas. I know doctors are waiting for FDA approval of that new drug. I can’t make any promises, but we might be able to help out with that.”

“Did you just try to bribe her?” Frank declared.

“No sir. I’m just trying to help sick kids. We know some people, that’s all.”

Bryce pointed a finger at him. “And I’m going to take you up on that regardless of what happens with the ranch.”

“Yes ma’am,” Bill replied, showing his teeth. “In any case, we would like to meet with you at your earliest convenience.”

“As would I, Doctor Miller,” Frank said. “I was very sorry to hear about your uncle’s passing,” he added. “He and I had many productive conversations about the future of The Sun right up there on the porch.”

“If they were so productive,” snapped Doreen, “why did he will the ranch to her?”

A pained expression crossed Frank’s face. “I also applaud your work,” he said, “and I wanted you know that we’ll have a robust educational program here on the property for children, making sure they get outdoors and enjoy nature...”

“Are you going to teach them how to not get gored by a buffalo?” interrupted Bill.

“Bison,” Frank said, trying not to clench his teeth. “They’ll be perfectly safe.”

“The buffalo or the kids?” Bill said, half-smiling.

“Honey,” Doreen said, touching Bryce on the arm, “don’t you think the world has enough snakes and bunnies?”

“But not enough McMansions for the rich?” Frank shot back.

“And you’d rather see oil wells?” Doreen retorted.

“Of course not,” Frank replied tartly. “They’re foul, evil things.”

“I see. So, what’s in your gas tank over there?” asked Bill, jerking a thumb in the direction of Frank’s car. “Vegetable oil?” Frank looked uncomfortable again. “We have a robust

renewable energy program at our company, Doctor Miller,” Bill continued. “We know where the future is headed.”

“You ought to know, you’re the ones screwing it up,” Doreen interjected.

“Remind me again how many solar panels they’re planning to put on the roof of that country club?” he said to Doreen, showing his teeth.

“None,” she replied curtly. “We’ll have lots of recycling though,” she said to Bryce, holding up a finger. “Mr. Sampson doesn’t like to waste anything.”

“Is that why he wrote all those fraudulent checks,” Frank retorted.

Bryce raised her eyebrows. “Fraudulent checks?”

“Those charges were dropped,” Doreen said quickly. “He had a misunderstanding with a contractor, that’s all.”

“Mark Sampson isn’t even his real name,” Frank said to Bryce.

“It isn’t?” she replied.

“And he’s wanted back in Greece for tax evasion,” Frank added.

“He’s never been convicted of anything,” Doreen said, shooting Frank a deadly look. “Unlike that Board member of your organization.” She leaned toward Bryce conspiratorially. “Insider trading on Wall Street. Can you imagine?” she said in mock shock, eyes wide.

Frank grimaced as Bill showed his teeth again.

Earl grinned. “I love it.”

“I understand you’re a jazz fan,” Doreen said to Bryce, leaning in. “I can’t wait to tell you about the music festival Mr. Sampson wants to start.”

“It’ll be held right over there too,” Frank said, pointing at an expanse of grassland. “Just beyond the shopping mall.”

“Shopping mall?” said Bryce, alarmed once more.

“Boutique shops only,” Doreen reassured her with another friendly pat on the arm. “They’ll be very tasteful.”

“Only if you think tourists from Texas have any taste,” Frank said.

“And you like your jewelry made in China,” Bill added.

“Tourism provides clean jobs,” Doreen countered. “That’s why we have the support of the Mayor and the town council. We all think *it’s* the future.”

“I can sum up their vision of the future in two words...” Bill started.

“Healthy living,” Doreen interrupted.

“Fur coats,” Frank cut in.

“Minimum wage,” Bill finished.

Bryce furrowed her brow at all of them, feeling dazed.

“Are you aware, Doctor Miller,” Bill continued, “that this county has one of the highest poverty rates in the whole state? Not to mention a serious drug problem.”

“I didn’t know that,” she replied.

“Not like the clean-and-sober oil industry,” Frank said, rolling his eyes.

“How many people will you be hiring?” Bill asked. “Two or three bird watchers? We’ll be hiring dozens of people,” Bill said to Bryce.

“For just a few months,” Doreen announced. “We call them “thank you ma’am” jobs. Here today, gone tomorrow.” She leaned forward. “Not to mention all the brothels that come to town,” she said confidentially. “Being a doctor you know what that means.”

Bryce opened her mouth to respond.

“Don’t forget the meth labs,” Frank interrupted. “This place is perfect. I bet there’ll be two or three right over there.” He pointed toward the river.

“I see,” said Bill, sounding irritated at last. “We don’t tolerate that of course.”

Doreen leaned toward Bryce, giving her a look. “What’s that new show on TV about the high school chemistry teacher? Isn’t it set in New Mexico?”

Bryce noticed that the fourth person had come up. He stood apart from the others, his hands clasped behind him patiently. He was small and thin with a sallow complexion and pale blue eyes. He was dressed in a dark, generic suit with a red tie and black loafers, looking more like an accountant than... what?

“And you are?” she asked.

“Kevin,” he said pleasantly, nodding his head slightly. “Kevin Malcolm. I represent your neighbor to the north. I’m here to pay my respects as well.”

“Did you know my uncle?”

“I did not.”

Bryce frowned. “Are you a real estate agent?”

“I am not.”

He didn’t unclasp his hands, she noticed. “Do you have a card?” she asked.

“No. We think they’re environmentally wasteful. We’ll contact you.”

Bryce noticed that the other three suitors were scrutinizing Kevin with expressions that ranged from awe to fear. She shot a glance at Earl, but he was squinting at the odd-looking man as well.

“Do you live in Alameda?” she asked Kevin.

“I do not.”

Bryce waited for him to say something more, but he just stood there silently, hands still clasped behind him. “How did you know I was here?” she asked.

A shadow of unease crossed Kevin’s face. “How did they know?” he said, nodding at the other three, each of whom looked away.

Bryce sighed at him. “What’s your vision for The Sun?”

“It’s confidential,” he replied coolly. “The owner will be here later this week. He would like to talk privately with you.”

“The Big Kahuna himself?” Earl said, impressed. “This is getting serious.”

“Alright,” Bryce said with an impatient nod. “I’m happy to meet with him. Do you want my phone number?”

“We already have it,” Kevin replied.

“You do?” she said, astonished.

“And they’ve probably read every email you’ve ever written,” Frank said darkly. “Not to mention every web site you’ve visited.”

Kevin shook his head. “I’m afraid that’s not allowed, as you know.”

“Well, that’s reassuring,” Bryce said, not sounding reassured at all.

She noticed that the looks of awe and fear had returned to the faces of the other suitors. Was it just his boss’s money or did the odd man in the red tie represent some sort of threat? When no one broke the silence, Bryce stuffed the business cards she had been holding into her vest and pulled her phone from the other pocket.

She needed this to be over.

“I have to call the foreman. Nice to meet everyone,” she said in her best doctorly voice. “Thank you for driving out. I’ll call you tomorrow to set up appointments. Mr. Nib...” She caught herself. “Mr. Malcolm. Call me when you’re ready.”

Bryce turned around to indicate that the meeting was over, feeling for a moment like she was back in the hospital. She punched the foreman's number and lifted the phone to her ear. She glanced over her shoulder. The suitors were heading back to their vehicles.

She caught Earl's eye. "Those are my choices?" she whispered.

"Afraid so."

She tilted a chin at Kevin's back. "Do you think he really has my phone number?"

"Yes, I do," Earl replied ominously.

The message machine came on again. "Hi, this is Matt..." She could hear car doors slamming behind her. She waited impatiently for the message to finish, drumming her fingers against her thigh. There was a beep.

"Mister Harris?" she said into the phone. "It's Bryce. It's about four. I'm up at my uncle's house, standing here with Mr. Holcombe." She paused as a car honked angrily in the parking area. "We're just wondering where you are. I hope everything is alright. Give me a call as soon as you can."

She hung up and tapped the phone thoughtfully against her palm. *Where was the foreman? Missing?* It felt that way. In seventh grade, a classmate of hers disappeared one morning while walking to school. The teachers thought she had stayed home sick while her mom thought she was safe in class. It was lunch before an alarm was raised and general panic set in. Police arrived. Fortunately, the girl was quickly discovered at a local video arcade eagerly neglecting her education.

Bryce's thoughts were interrupted by another honk of a horn as the cars jockeyed to leave the parking area.

"Does the foreman smoke?" she said suddenly.

"Cigarettes?" Earl replied, watching the cars leave. "Not that I saw."

"There was a pile of butts outside his back door. There was a dog too."

Earl turned his head sharply to her. "What dog?"

"In the back of the silver truck," she replied. "Collie, I'm pretty sure. Black-and-white?"

"That's Matt's dog," he said, now alarmed.

"Is that a problem?"

"That dog never leaves his side. Something's wrong."

They pulled up sharply at the foreman's house in Earl's truck, kicking up a small cloud of dust. On the drive, they speculated about his disappearance, settling on the theory that he was on the ranch somewhere with the quad, possibly at the South Well, and had misplaced his radio. It didn't explain the dog's presence in the truck, however, unless the animal had been chained to prevent him from following Matt, Earl said. The two were inseparable, having gone through rough times together over the years including a bout of homelessness. Raised in Michigan, Earl told her, Matt quit college to cowboy on cattle ranches out West but became disillusioned with the traditional way of doing things. He was looking for an operation that was kinder to the land and its animals which made him the ideal foreman for her uncle, who wanted to do something new on The Sun.

"Is he afraid I'll cut him loose right away?" Bryce asked as they came to a stop.

"No, I think he expects to stay on for a little while."

"Then why did he want to speak with me, do you think?"

"No idea. Let's ask him when we find him," Earl said as he opened the door of his truck and began to climb out. "I'll check the house. You look in on the dog. See if he's chained. His name is Seymour."

The dog suddenly appeared in the back of the silver pickup, his ears alert. He looked happy to see Earl, Bryce thought.

"Seymour?" she said, opening her door.

"Don't ask me," Earl replied. "I think it has something to do with Matt's sense of humor. Like his horse, Brunhilda."

Earl headed toward the house. Bryce shut the truck door behind her as she scanned the area. Nothing had changed as far as she could tell. The corral was still empty. Beyond it a narrow dirt lane crested a low hill before disappearing. She turned to the silver pickup.

"Hello Seymour," she said cheerfully as she approached. "Remember me?" The dog wagged its tail. "Are you here voluntarily?" she asked while surveying the truck bed. The dog didn't appear to be connected to it by a chain.

"Looks like you're free. So, where did your person go?" she said kindly. "Not telling? Maybe there's a clue here somewhere."

She inspected the truck's cabin again through the open passenger window but nothing new stood out. Wait. Something caught her eye near the steering wheel. There was a key in the truck's ignition. Actually, it was part of a clump of keys that hung down, suggesting there were a lot of locks on the ranch. Locks to what?

A door slammed. "The house is empty," Earl called loudly. "Is Seymour still there?"

"He is," she called back. "And he's not chained."

"That's not good," Earl said as he passed through the gate in the fence. "It means they got separated somehow and he doesn't know where Matt's at. Is the horse still gone?"

Bryce nodded. "Yes. So is the quad."

"Hoo boy," Earl sighed as he reached her. "I couldn't tell you why exactly, but I got the feeling Matt hadn't been home for a while."

"When's the last time you spoke with him?" she asked.

"Two days ago."

"Did he sound anxious to you?"

"No," Earl replied, squinting at the corral. "He sounded like Matt. I wonder what happened to his horse?"

Bryce followed his gaze. "Is he attached to her too?"

"Not like Seymour. Actually, Brunhilda was owned by your uncle. That means she belongs to you."

"Is she valuable? Could she have been stolen?"

"She's a champion roper, so that's a possibility. Or maybe she got out somehow." Earl squinted at Seymour. "But if Matt went looking for her why didn't he take his dog?"

Seymour flattened his ears under Earl's squint as if he had done something wrong.

"What's a roper?" Bryce said, feeling sheepish.

Earl squinted at her now. "Do you know what a rodeo is? Brunhilda's part of the team that ropes cattle. Her and Matt."

"Oh," Bryce said with a nod, realizing she had never watched an actual rodeo in her life – or ever wanted to. "Is it important there's a key in the ignition?"

"No. I do it too," Earl replied as he peered through the window. "But it does mean he can't get through any of the perimeter gates, so he's likely still on the ranch as we thought. I tell you what, I'm going to run down to the trailer and see if the Mexican knows anything."

“Pardon me, the Mexican?” Bryce said, offended.

“Yes, the Mexican,” Earl replied, sounding annoyed. “Don’t go and get all liberal on me. He’s the ranch hand. Estevan. From Mexico. Which makes him Mexican.” He turned toward his truck. “I won’t be gone long. Maybe find Seymour some food.”

He ambled to his truck, climbed in, and fired it up. As he drove toward the other buildings, Bryce turned to the dog.

“Looks like it’s just you and me, handsome. Are you hungry?”

He wagged vigorously.

“Alright, let’s find some food. What sort of name is Seymour anyway?”

As she pushed off from the truck, the dog rose to its feet and jumped to the ground.

Approaching the little house, Bryce heard the windmill screech again. A sense of foreboding washed over her. The foreman sounded worried on the phone when they talked last week, but there was nothing unusual about that, right? Life had thrown him a huge curve ball. His employer had died. She was going to sell the ranch. Where would he go? Or was it something else? The possibility of foul play crept into her mind, but she pushed it away, blaming the notion on the collection of Sherlock Holmes stories on her bedside table though she rarely found time to read. She turned the doorknob and entered the house, Seymour close on her heels. Earl thought Matt hadn’t been home in a while, why? Was it some ranch thing – a missing cowboy hat or boots in the wrong place? Perhaps it was the stuffy air she sensed as she entered the living room!

A flashing light caught her eye. Bryce crossed to the coffee table and peered down at the laptop. A red light blinked slowly along its lower rim – the signal that the battery had drained. It was unplugged from the wall. Had it been left on? If not, how long would it take to drain on its own? There was a pile of papers next to the laptop. She peeked at them. She saw the words “Bull Sale” at the top of an article featuring a handsome animal. There was also a magazine about organic wine-making. She heard a small whimper behind her.

Seymour sat patiently in the kitchen doorway. “Sorry about that,” Bryce said, heading toward him. “So, what does he feed you?”

In the kitchen, she saw two bowls resting quietly on a dirty dish towel at the foot of a counter. One was a large dog water dish, but the other looked like a breakfast bowl for cereal. On

the countertop sat a bag of cheap dog kibble. Seeing no other source of nourishment, she grabbed the bag and poured kibble noisily into the empty bowl.

“Here you go,” she said hopefully.

The dog continued to sit and stare at her, almost reproachfully, she thought.

“No good?” she said in surprise. “Does this stuff go bad?”

As she inspected the bag for an expiration date, the dog came forward a few feet and sat on its haunches again – staring straight at the cupboard above the counter.

“December 2008,” she said to Seymour with a shrug. “So, it’s still ok.”

She put the bag of kibble down and nodded at the cupboard. “Let me guess, the good stuff’s in here.”

The dog wagged as she reached for the handle on the cupboard. Opening it, she saw dozens of cans of tuna fish, neatly stacked. She opened the other door, revealing more tuna. She blinked. Altogether, there were forty cans at least. She could hear the swish of the dog’s tail on the floor as it wagged energetically.

Bryce pulled down a can. “Tuna? That’s what he gives you?” She checked the ingredients and then shrugged. “Dogs eat fish, right? Dogs eat anything. Alright, tuna it is.”

A quick scan of the countertop failed to produce a can opener, however, so she pulled open a drawer. It was full of spoons, forks, and knives, all tumbled together. The drawer below it had what she wanted – lots of utensils – but not a can opener. She checked a third drawer, which was empty, before returning to the utensil drawer, which she now searched carefully. Still no can opener. Frowning, she crossed to the sink, discovering a church-key bottle opener near a forest of empty beer bottles along the sink’s edge. She searched the dishwasher. Nothing. She peered into the beer bottle forest, checked three other drawers and another cupboard, all without success. She searched the kitchen table and the refrigerator next before returning to the tuna cupboard for another look.

“Where’s the can opener?” she asked the dog.

She surveyed the living room briefly before opening the back door and examining the area surrounding the pile of cigarette butts. There were two empty power drink containers she hadn’t noticed before, but no can opener. Frowning deeper, she returned to the kitchen. Something wasn’t right. A can opener for so much tuna should be easy to find. Seymour

continued to wait patiently, tail wagging. Unconsciously, Bryce began to tap the can of tuna against her palm thoughtfully as if it were her phone.

“Curious,” she said to the dog, who cocked its head slightly.

She glanced down at the bowls on the ground, trying to make a decision about the kibble, when she noticed something odd about the water dish. She reached down and lifted it up slowly – and then turned it over.

It was dry.

Bryce drew a sharp breath. “What happened to your water?” she asked Seymour as she stood up. “Were you shut inside?” How long did it take a dog to drink all its water, she wondered? A day? Two? As long as it took a laptop battery to drain?

“He left you behind, didn’t he?” she said to the dog. “To go somewhere.”

She looked at the front door. Earl hadn’t unlocked it when he entered, she realized. He just walked straight in. She remembered the keys in the truck’s ignition. Nobody probably locked their doors on a ranch. Anyone could have entered the house.

She studied Seymour. “So, who let you get out?”

Suddenly, the house felt ominous. Had she overlooked something important? She surveyed the kitchen from where she stood. There was an empty cork bulletin board on the wall that she hadn’t seen before. Five photographs were pinned to the refrigerator door. A smiling young woman. A Marine in full uniform. An older couple. Two of Seymour. There was a wall calendar nearby, two years out-of-date. She backed into the living room, holding the water dish and the tuna can. Nothing new. She stepped into the narrow hall to her right. There were four doors, she saw, three of them closed. The one at the end of the hall was partially open. She could see a sink, a bathroom rug, and a small window in the far wall.

Earl said the house was empty – but did he check all the rooms?

Cradling the water dish in an arm, Bryce opened the nearest door, exposing an unmade queen-sized bed and a ruffled dog bed lying at its foot. Entering the room cautiously, she saw a modernist night-stand next to the bed and a new-looking chest of drawers along a far wall. IKEA, she suspected. There was an empty set of book shelves on a wall. Crossing the room, she peered at a desk under a window dimmed by heavy curtains. Banking-type papers and receipts sat on the desk, which was missing its chair. There was a closet in a corner. Its door was ajar. She approached it slowly and then hesitated. She pulled the door open swiftly. The closet was

bare except for a string of nearly identical western shirts on hangers, an old suitcase on the floor, and a few boxes on a shelf.

She exhaled.

Bryce suspected the second door led to a second bedroom. It was partially open. Pushing it open gingerly with a finger, she saw a single, sheetless bed against a wall, a small pile of clothing in the middle of the floor and not much else. A peek behind the door revealed a fat-tire bicycle leaning against the wall. Did ranch foremen ride bikes? There wasn't a helmet, she noticed. Nothing stood out among the clothing, so she worked her way toward a closed door near a thinly curtained window. Surely another closet, she thought. She paused in front of the door. Why was it shut? She gripped the handle and pulled, but it refused to budge. She tried again with similar results. The handle turned easily in her hand, so why was it stuck? She lowered the water dish and the tuna can to the floor and gave the door a hard, quick jerk with both hands. It opened with a loud creak. Bryce stepped back quickly. She saw... nothing. The closet was empty except for two dusty mousetraps in a corner, one of which appeared to be sprung.

There was one more door in the hall. She yanked it open unceremoniously. Towels on shelves. Toilet bowl cleaner. A bucket and a mop. She caught Seymour's eye as he sat patiently at the end of the hall. He cocked his head at her.

Outside, Bryce walked rapidly through the gate in the fence, Seymour close behind. Earl was waiting for her in his truck, the engine running. She carried the water dish and the solitary can of tuna, having given Seymour a drink of water first.

"What took you so long?" he said loudly.

"I couldn't find a can opener."

"Can opener? Are you talking about tuna?" Earl said as she approached the truck. "I told Matt a hundred times to stop feeding Seymour that stuff. Dogs don't eat tuna normally."

"It's all he wants," Bryce replied, holding the can up. "Did you find the...Mexican?"

"No. Estevan's not home and his truck is gone, but that's not unusual. He might be out moving the herd, though that's usually Matt's job. Anyway, I thought we'd run down to that South Well in case someone went there to fix it."

He whistled to Seymour. "Let's go," he ordered, but the dog jumped into the bed of Matt's truck instead. After giving them a sad look, he disappeared.

"That's not good," Earl said.

“Seymour didn’t have any water in his bowl. I think he’d been left inside.”

“I do it,” Earl said with a shrug. “Sometimes you have to leave them. Especially with a dog like Seymour. He’d follow Matt anywhere. I’m sure he had a good reason.”

“But I found Seymour in the truck,” she protested. “Someone let him out.”

Earl thoughtfully stared at his hands on the steering wheel.

“I think something’s happened,” Bryce said.

He looked up. “I do too. Come on.”

The drive to the pasture took less time than she expected. After passing through the Headquarters, they turned right at a fork in the road, leaving the grove of tall trees behind and confronting Bryce with another sweeping view of the grasslands. To keep their minds off the foreman’s mysterious absence, they chatted about their lives. Raised in the oil patch of eastern Oklahoma, Earl earned a degree in economics, he told her, thinking he might go into business. After completing a stint with the Army, however, he decided to try his hand at cowboying for a while to see what it was like. His first job, as a wrangler on the legendary Spur Ranch in eastern New Mexico, brought him to Sun country. Other jobs followed. The work suited him but didn’t much care for the rough way the land or the animals were being treated on these places and because he was a contrarian by nature he told his bosses so. Eventually, he took up a dare from a rancher he respected to put his money where his mouth was and purchased the Rafter T in 1964. Wife? Widowed. Kids? None. What about herself? Bryce shrugged. No husband. No kids. No squeeze at the moment. No time. She grew up in South Boston as an only child. Sailed a lot with her dad. Had good grades, but focused on athletics in high school and planned to try for college on a sports scholarship. Changed her mind at the last minute, opting to become a doctor instead after a good friend fell ill. Figured it was a long shot, but to her surprise she was accepted to Columbia, then Harvard Medical School. Now the hospital.

“That’s my story,” she said. “Such as it is.”

Earl gave her a look. “That’s a pretty good story,” he said. “Were you part of that bussing nonsense that took place in Boston back in the seventies?”

“My father was,” Bryce replied. “He taught at South Boston High, which is where I went. He was right in the middle of the desegregation fight. It wasn’t nonsense, by the way. My father said it was the right thing to do.”

“It was nonsense if it was just poor people that got bussed,” Earl insisted. “Or did they bus the kids of white, wealthy liberals to black schools?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she conceded.

“Then it was the wrong thing to do,” Earl declared. The truck suddenly clattered loudly across a cattle guard.

“Tell me about The Sun,” Bryce said, changing the subject.

“Well, it’s got a long history, that’s for sure,” he said with a nod. “In the 1700s, it was owned by a wealthy family, the Quintanas, who supposedly had roots in Spanish nobility. Back then it was called *Rancho Corazon del Sol*,” Earl said in twangy Spanish. “Heart of the Sun. And it’s been coveted for just as long, I suppose like any heart.”

He was quiet for a moment.

“Unfortunately, the ranch became the focus of a dispute among Quintana family heirs,” he continued, “a brother and a sister. According to legend, it was so bad their father decided to hide his wealth in a strong box and bury it in the mountains to keep his children from fighting over it when he died. Buried Spanish gold.” He shook his head skeptically. “It’s brought a lot of crazies to the area over the years to search for it.”

“Any luck?”

“None. That’s because it’s bunch of hogwash. No historian believes the story, but that doesn’t seem to discourage the crazies. Anyway, the Quintana feud ended tragically.”

“What happened?”

“The brother inherited the land and decided to sell the ranch,” Earl recounted, “but the sister opposed it. One of them died, I forget which.”

“How?”

“Murder, I think,” he replied.

Bryce held tightly onto the arm rest as Earl suddenly made a sharp turn to the left. “What happened to the ranch?”

“It ended up in the hands of their rivals, the Mirabals,” he continued. “Not sure how it happened. In any case, ol’ Diego Mirabal secured a grant from the King of Spain for most of this

country after Comanche raids drove a lot of the settlers out. Things were calm for a while after that but blew up when the area became Mexican territory after the Revolution. It was a mess. People squatted on deeded land. Property titles were fought over for years in court. Fortunately, your ranch was kept intact because Mirabal's grandson made a fortune trading with the Americans. Did you know a branch of the Santa Fe Trail crosses The Sun?"

"I didn't!" Bryce exclaimed.

"It does, though it's not much to look at," Earl said with a shrug. "Anyway, in 1856 the ranch passed to Eamon Fitzgerald, an Irishman who came here to trade. Rumor is he won it in a card game from the Mirabal heir, but I don't believe it. People are always making things like that up." He shook his head. "However they got it, the Fitzgerald clan made out like bandits selling beef to the miners up in Dunraven during the gold boom. But then the veins ran out and they had to sell parts of The Sun to keep going. That's how it got down to its current size. Later, they sold the whole place to a shady Anglo lawyer from Santa Fe."

"What happened next?" Bryce asked.

"After World War I, it was bought by a New Yorker and became a dude ranch. It was quite the destination, apparently. Some famous people stayed here, including a writer from England. I forget his name. And some archaeologist. By the way, the old homestead is near the wildlife refuge." Earl nodded to the east. "The Depression put an end to the dude business and the New Yorker got embroiled in a scandal back home involving a young lady who wasn't his wife. When he went bankrupt the ranch was forfeited to his insurance company. After the war, they sold The Sun to a Texas oilman named Lloyd Talbot who was married to a Hollywood movie star. They didn't come to the ranch much and when he died she sold it to a guy who made a fortune selling popsicles."

"Popsicles?"

Earl shrugged. "Unfortunately, he let the ranch run down. His cattle kept coming onto my place and a neighbor's. Some animals got hit on the highway. There were a series of owners after that, including a big shot businessman from Denver. But no one was serious about keeping The Sun as a viable cattle operation until your uncle bought it." Earl turned his head to her. "And now it belongs to you," he said with finality.

Bryce nodded, not sure what to say. Suddenly, they hit another cattle guard hard, rattling the truck. Up ahead, she could see a large, dark cylindrical structure.

“What’s that?” she asked, pointing.

“That’s the South Well tank,” Earl replied. “Your uncle had it custom-made. It can water the whole thousand-head herd at one time.” He eased up on the accelerator a bit as they approached the tank.

“I don’t understand,” Bryce said, peering around. “Shouldn’t there be a windmill?”

“Your uncle tore it down. Put in a solar pump. See the panels?” He pointed at a small structure to the left of the tank and a bank of solar panels beyond it. “I advised him against it. There was nothing wrong with the windmill. Anyway, the pump keeps acting up. It’s been driving Matt crazy. We’re going to go around this way to get there.”

He guided the truck to the right. As they bounced across a rough patch of ground, Bryce noticed that the grass had been replaced by dried mud pocked with holes and ridges. Cattle tracks, she supposed. She spied a metal trough at the base of the tank, encircling it. She could see sky reflected on liquid inside. She studied the structure, but it had no other features except for a skinny metal ladder attached to the side that rose to the top of the tank.

“How often do the cattle come here to drink?” she asked as they rounded its side.

“About once a week. Pipes run water to the pastures from here. Matt can pretty much manage the whole southern half of the ranch from this well. That’s why it’s bad when it breaks down. I tried to warn your uncle...”

Earl fell silent suddenly. A green all-terrain vehicle had come into view. It was parked close to the dark tank. And it was empty.

“Is that the quad?” Bryce asked.

“It is. And that’s not where Matt usually stops,” Earl said, his voice quiet.

He pulled up to the quad and shut off the truck’s engine. They climbed out. To her surprise, he walked past the four-wheeler, apparently wishing to see around the big tank. Bryce headed for the quad, her stomach tightening. It looked like a supersized golf cart, she thought, but with fat tires and no top. Reaching it, she leaned over its side. She saw a solitary key in the ignition, a walkie-talkie radio attached to a spot below the dashboard, a red bandanna hanging from a knob, and a tube of sun screen in one of the cup holders between the two front seats. On the passenger seat sat a dirty towel and a pair of sunglasses. On the floor were a pair of mud-crusted work boots, an orange-handled hammer, and a pair of pliers. On the floor in the back

rested a pair of heavy-duty wire cutters, a roll of gray wire, a short, sharp shovel with a red handle, and a large amount of steel chain, uncoiled, both ends of which held metal hooks.

No can opener.

“Find anything?” Earl said, giving her a start.

“What’s that?” she said, pointing at the chain with the metal hooks.

“Tow chain. There can be a lot of mud out here. Wait a minute.” Earl frowned and leaned over the machine. He pointed at the radio. “That’s not where it should be.”

“What do you mean?”

“When he’s driving, Matt keeps the radio in one of those.” His pointed at the cup holders between the seats. “It fits pretty good and doesn’t bounce around.”

“Maybe he put the radio back when he parked here?”

Earl made a face. “Maybe. But he wasn’t that tidy. You’ve seen his house.” He turned to survey the area around them, hands on his hips. “Something’s not right,” he said.

Bryce felt the sense of foreboding again, deeper this time.

“Stay here,” he ordered.

He walked to the left, disappearing around the side of the large tank. The air was completely still. Bryce couldn’t even hear a solitary bird singing. Where was the foreman? The quad had the feel of being hidden behind the tank, it seemed to her. Maybe the foreman brought his horse with him and then rode away, leaving the quad behind. But why would he do that? Besides, he would have taken his radio, she assumed.

And his dog.

Suddenly, she heard a muffled, clanging sound that echoed dully through the tank. Then a ‘ping’ pierced the stillness as metal struck metal. It came from the other side. What was Earl doing over there? Was he hurt? She decided to find out. Rounding the tank quickly, she saw him climbing the narrow ladder. She slowed her pace. Why would he go up there? Reaching the top, Earl ceased climbing. He stared at something in the tank. Then he removed his cowboy hat and held it to his chest, bowing his head.

“Hoo boy,” she heard him mutter.

Bryce inhaled sharply as she recognized the melancholy slump of his shoulders, a sight she had seen too many times. “What’s happened?” she asked, coming forward.

“I found Matt,” he called down quietly.

“Are you sure it’s him?”

“I am.”

His meaning was clear: the foreman was *dead*. How could that be? They were in the middle of *nowhere*. She exhaled slowly. “I’m sorry.”

“I am too. He was a good kid,” Earl said from the top of the ladder.

“What happened?”

“I’m no expert, but it looks like he was hit on the back of the head.”

“Murder?” Bryce asked, incredulous.

“It looks like it,” Earl said as he replaced the hat on his head. “We need to call Dale.” He began to climb down the ladder. “He’s the Chief of the Police department in Alameda. I’ve got a radio in the truck.”

Chief of Police? Murder? Bryce felt dizzy. Earl reached the bottom of the ladder. His face was grim.

“Why would someone kill him?” she asked.

“I have no idea,” Earl replied, shaking his head and sounding depressed. “Matt could be a hot head at times, but never enough for something like this. I’m going to go call Dale.”

He began walking back to his truck, limping slightly, she noticed. He seemed to have aged ten years since their arrival at the tank.

“I’d like to go up and see for myself, if that’s ok,” she called.

“Suit yourself,” he replied without turning his head.

Bryce climbed the narrow rungs of the ladder easily, slowing her pace only as the top approached. The tank was nearly full, she saw, the water reflecting the clear sky above. Not far away, a body floated face-down. The striped pattern of his light-colored western shirt was visible above the waterline, as was the back of his head. It looked like a bloody mess. A black lump floated nearby – his cowboy hat, she assumed. She couldn’t see anything else in the water near the body. Bryce lifted her eyes. There was a round object on the tank wall directly across from her, extending over the water. What was it? She climbed up another rung to get a better view. A pipe. To fill the tank with water. She saw a few leaves floating. But where were the trees?

She leaned heavily on the ladder for a moment. How did the foreman’s body get up here, she wondered? She looked at the ground, far below. Had the foreman been killed down there or did someone chase him up here? He was probably struck on the ground, she decided. But how

did the killer get the body up the ladder? She studied it as it floated in the water. The foreman must have weighed at least two hundred pounds, she calculated. Carrying him would not have been easy. That suggested a man, but not necessarily. A strong woman could have done it too. Bryce suddenly realized her fingerprints were all over the ladder. So much for crime scene integrity.

Right, *Murder*.

Feeling wobbly suddenly, Bryce gripped the sides of the ladder firmly as if afraid she might slip and fall, though she knew she wouldn't. How could such a terrible thing happen in such a beautiful place? A puff of air tickled her face, smelling of earth and grass. Then it faded away to stillness, as if the ranch had decided to hold its breath. Lifting her head, she saw that the view from the top of the tank was extraordinary. She climbed up another rung on the ladder, its second-to-last. She could see the dip where the meandering river crossed the land. There was a low row of hills to the east and blue sky above it all. Somewhere out there beyond the grass was the oil-and-gas field that Earl mentioned, though it was hard to imagine. From where she stood, it all looked so pristine and peaceful.

Where was Earl? On the other side of the tank, hidden from view. Were the police on their way? The puff of air returned. Bryce balanced herself carefully on the rung, feeling a little bit like she stood on a surfboard. She decided to twist around to see the western half of the ranch. She touched the top of the ladder lightly with her right hand as she turned to her left. She could see the ranch Headquarters not far away and beyond it her uncle's house on the hill. She traced the entrance road to its source at the gate on Highway 70. Then she followed the river upstream as it passed through a compact cluster of buildings, which had to be the town of Alameda, before disappearing into the deep canyon. Among the buildings, she could see two church spires and six or seven two-story buildings. Twisting her body a bit more to the left, Bryce followed a ribbon of asphalt south from the town to a small huddle of structures fronting a bright lake. Farther to the south was more open country, though she could also see a swath of houses, loosely packed, in the distance.

Bryce turned back to the grasslands surrounding her, feeling now like she had climbed the tall mast of a boat. The sea of grass seemed just as deep and unfathomable as any ocean she had ever known. And just as marvelous. She spotted a dark mass in the distance. It had to be the

cattle herd, grazing a few miles away. A breeze touched her face again. How did Earl describe the ranch? *A beaut*. Indeed.

She took a deep breath.

For the moment, The Sun was all hers – dead body and everything.
