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The Butterfly House

Marcia Preston

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Extract

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Chapter 1

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From the window of my husband's house, I see the stranger stop beside our gate at the bottom of the snow-covered hill. He steps from his black Chevy Blazer, leaving the door open, and peers at the name on our mailbox. His down jacket hangs unzipped despite the cold overcast of the morning, and he's wearing cowboy boots. Even from this distance I am struck by the contrast of his black hair against the snow.

"You have the wrong house," I whisper, hoping he'll turn around and go back the way he came. Instead he gets back in the car and drives slowly up the slope. *Damn.*

I switch off the single lamp on the sunporch and lay aside the pillowtop I'm embroidering, a gift for someone I love. This one is a yellow-and-black anise swallowtail, scientifically correct. A dozen other pairs of silent wings lie stacked on a closet shelf—my butterfly collection, David calls it. Each

time he says the words I feel the wings inside my chest. He has no idea.

From the cool shadows of the house, I watch the stranger park his car and walk up the snow-packed sidewalk to the front door. He is surefooted and somber. I guess him to be about fifty, nearly twice my age, and for some reason this makes me even more uneasy. I stand motionless, holding my breath as he rings the bell and waits.

Go away. It's the wrong house.

He rings again. He doesn't look like a robber or rapist, but I'm too tired to open the door and pretend to be amiable while I give him directions to whatever he's seeking. I need my solitude, especially today. I realize I'm pressing one palm flat against my abdomen and jerk the hand away, clenching my fist. My breathing clots in my chest.

The bell chimes again, and I jump when the doorjamb rattles under his knock.

Go away, for heaven's sake! Nobody's home. Whoever you're looking for isn't here.

And then the stranger calls my name.

Not Roberta Dutreau, my married name, but my childhood name.

"Roberta Lee? Bobbie?"

His voice sounds deep and somehow muffled. "I saw your light. Please open the door."

My heart pounds. I don't know this man; how does he know me? David is at work—I don't know what to do.

"Please," he calls out. "It's about Lenora."

My breath sucks in. I hurry to the door and jerk it open, sending small tufts of snow onto the hallway floor. No one ever uses this door.

The stranger stands bareheaded, his weight on one leg with both knees bowing outward like a cowboy's. But he isn't a cowboy. He's Indian. His dark eyes meet mine and there's something familiar there—something I cannot name. He's stocky and muscular, a full head taller than I am.

I haven't spoken aloud all morning and my voice sounds hoarse. "Is something wrong with Lenora?"

The stranger keeps one hand in his jacket pocket and the other hooked by the thumb through the belt loop of his jeans. When he finally speaks, his bass voice is flat and expressionless. "You mean besides ten years of prison life?"

I grip the edge of the door with both hands. "Who *are* you?"

He meets my eyes again. "I'm Harley Jaines."

The name echoes in my head, bounces through the empty rooms. *Harley Jaines Harley Jaines Harley Jaines…*

"You *bastard*." I grip the door tighter. "Harley Jaines is dead."

"Sorry to contradict you, but I'm not." A muscle in his jaw twitches.

I remember a photograph from years ago, a young man in uniform with the same black eyes—my best friend's missing father. How I envied Cynthia the heroic status of that photo.

And now he stands at my door.

When my knees sag, the stranger reaches a hand toward my elbow, but I shrink away. He drops his hand to his side. "You'd better sit down. May I come in?"

I turn without answering and weave my way back to the sunporch, my hands touching each chair back and door frame as if I'm walking on a moving train. I hear the door close behind me and his quiet footsteps as he follows.

Sinking into the flowered chair beside the lamp, I pull the afghan over my legs and hug my knees tightly to my chest. He

stands in the center of the room, waiting, and finally sits on the sofa without being invited.

His voice is so low-pitched it's hard to distinguish the words above the buzzing in my ears. "I'm sorry to surprise you like this. I need to talk to you about Lenora."

"Have you been to see her?" I ask.

He nods. "Regularly, for several months. Ever since I found out where she was."

"How is she?"

"She says she's all right, but she isn't. I can see it in her eyes."

"We thought…she said you were killed in Vietnam."

His eyes look away. "It's a long story."

He leans back, gazing out the wide windows toward the endless vista of snow-covered pines. "What I came about," Harley Jaines says finally. "Lenora needs your help."

He looks at me as if waiting for a reaction. But my mind has flown a dozen years away from here, to a house called Rockhaven that overlooks the Columbia River. I'm seeing Lenora the way she was then.

"I talked to the lawyer who represented her, if you can call it that," the stranger says. "He's convinced there was more to what happened than Lenora told him."

The wings rise to the back of my mouth. I wonder if he can see them beating behind my eyes as I regard him blankly. "And what does Lenora say?"

"She's told me about most of her life, a little at a time. She talks about you a lot. But she won't talk about that night."

He waits. A patient man. But my heart is like the permafrost beneath the northern Canadian soil. Resistant, enduring. I face him with silence.

"The attorney thinks you know the whole story. Says that when you were in the hospital, you told him Lenora was innocent."

My mouth twists. "Which hospital? Which time?" But I know exactly what he means.

"Lenora has a parole hearing in two weeks. I want you to come and testify. I've hired an attorney, a good one this time, and we're going to ask for more than parole. We're going to try for a pardon."

Harley Jaines watches my face. "She shouldn't have gone to prison," he says. "You know that, and I know it. I believe you have the power to set her free, if you come to the hearing and tell the truth."

I shake my head. "You're wrong. I have no power."

Outside, it has begun to snow again. I watch the air thicken. From the windows of our sunporch the world is a Christmas card, the pines stacked deep with snow. Despite the warmth of the house, I feel winter in my limbs.

"She's dying in that prison," he says. "When the spirit dies, the body follows."

Wrong again. I'm living proof. How can he be so naive? He's twice my age, a war veteran, a Cherokee, as I remember. But I don't bother to contradict him.

"Bobbie," says this man I've never met before, using the nickname he has no right to use, the nickname his daughter gave me. "Do you know where Cynthia is?"

The question catches me unprepared. I stammer. "I hear from her now and then."

"Why hasn't she visited her mother?"

My eyes cloud and I tighten my mouth to keep my face blank. "You'd have to ask her that."

"I'd like to," he says. "I'd like to see my daughter. She doesn't even know I'm alive."

Cynthia Jaines's husky, anguished voice on the phone six months ago echoes in my head. I picture the thin ghost who came to see me at Green Gables—a euphemism for the mental health facility where I lived for five years before I married David. Would seeing Harley Jaines save Cynthia, or push her, too, over the edge?

"She never gives me an address. I have the impression she moves around a lot. I don't know where she is." This is all true, so I meet his eyes when I say it. I've never been a good liar.

He nods, his face impassive. I can't tell if he believes me. *Where were you all those years,* I wonder. *Why did you let Lenora think you were dead?*

But I don't want to know his secrets. I don't even want to know mine.

My mind flutters to the appointment I've made at the women's clinic tomorrow morning and my stomach contracts. Will I be able to drive myself home afterward? What if I'm ill, or bleeding? What can I tell David that he will believe?

If Cynthia were here, she'd go with me. She'd take care of me, lie for me. Or talk me out of the decision I've made. I pull the afghan around my arms and take a deep breath. When Harley Jaines stands up, it startles me.

"I'll let you know when the hearing is scheduled," he says. "May I have your phone number?"

Perhaps if he can call me, he won't come here again. I rise slowly, untangling myself from the afghan, and scribble the number on a pad by the phone. I hand him the paper without meeting his eyes. "Please don't call in the evenings."

He accepts it with cigar-shaped fingers that bear no rings. "Lenora doesn't know I'm here," he says, and pauses. "You tried to

tell the truth once, but no one would listen. I'm asking you to try again."

Suddenly I'm weary of his childish assumptions. My voice tightens. "Truth doesn't set people free. Didn't you learn that in the war? You have no idea what you're asking."

This time his dark eyes register some emotion, and I see them take note of the scars that snake down my jawline and flood my throat. He has no right to come here and ask me to rake those scars raw again.

A thought comes to me that his sudden appearance might be some cosmic punishment for the procedure I've consented to tomorrow.

But no. That decision is merciful. I'm sane enough, at least, to know that. If I never know another thing for certain, I know I have neither the right nor the skills to mother a child.

I lead Harley Jaines to the door, close and lock it behind him. But with my back pressed against the door, my eyes closed, I see a vision of Lenora as a young woman—Lenora, with the ocean-colored eyes, the person I've loved most in all my life.

This isn't fair.

Then I remember Lenora seven years ago, in a cold room floored in cheap tile. Her face looked ashen against the orange prison garb, her long chestnut hair already dulled and streaked with gray. And I hear the prison guard's comment behind my back as I stepped into the visiting room: "Ain't *she* something? Come to visit her mother's killer."

Outside, the black Blazer's engine bursts into life. I lean against the door until I hear the SUV drive away, then make my way back to the sunporch. Without turning on the lamp, I stand at the window and watch the snow.

Harley Jaines is wrong.

No one knows the truth about Lenora and Cynthia Jaines, Ruth and Bobbie Lee. Least of all me.