

*Lord of Silver Ridge*

by William G. Tedford

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## *One*

**T**he acrid smell of hot metal wafting on a random spring breeze seared away the fleeting dreams of a light sleep. Evelyn Darker's eyes opened to the darkness of her bedroom. She rolled onto her stomach, hugged the blankets to her chin, and peered in dread through her open window. She had seen it on previous nights. And smelled it. And there it was again, a glimmering ruby in the night, brighter and closer than ever.

Shocked to breathlessness, she buried her face in her pillow. Dare she call for help? Her three brothers had been drinking for hours. Of what use would they be to her? She had told Abe about the light a week or so ago. He had treated her with his usual contempt. Lazarus had cackled

Lord of Silver Ridge

with sadistic glee. *“Demons from hell, Evie! Demons from hell come to snatch your pretty little soul!”*

Noah had ignored her.

The crimson light whispered to her. It had whispered to her on previous nights, but for the first time since its visits began, she felt certain the sound was more than her overactive imagination at work. It called her name. It drew ever closer, night by night, gradually acclimatizing her to its presence. She had succumbed to it. Her curiosity had outgrown her fear. For how much longer could she hold it at bay and not answer back?

The light moved out of view in the weeds along the side of the house. She held her breath, closed her eyes, and heard a scraping noise on the front porch. The porch extended around the side of the house as far as her window. It would bring the creature to her.

The odor changed character slightly and became the stronger odor of singed wood. It had never come this close before. She made a decision finally, conscious of having done so only when she threw her covers aside and rolled to her feet. Barefoot, dressed only in her cotton nightie, she tiptoed to the window. If a demon meant to snatch her soul away, how much worse could hell be than her hapless life with her three brothers? Decay permeated the very walls of her prison, although it was the consequence of defying Abraham and not the house itself that held her prisoner.

She parted lace curtains older than her own nineteen years and peered into the dark night. The window had been missing its screen for most of the spring. She hoisted it open and extended one pale leg over the sill. A floor

board creaked and she paused, then stepped the rest of the way outside.

A cool spring breeze stirred the foliage of the trees about the house. She scanned the dark face of the bushes and then saw the ruby glow out back of the house and on the side of the rising Appalachian hill that blocked the morning sun until midday.

She sighed in despair. Did it expect her to follow it? It tormented her. It preyed upon more than just her curiosity. Despite her fears, it had become a source of promise as well, opening her life to new and exciting possibilities.

She clasped her arms across her breasts and shivered in the chill, debating whether to give in to temptation or abide by common sense. Where would it take her if she followed? What could it possibly want with her?

She'd find out. She stepped gingerly down the splinter-ridden stairs to the gravel drive and danced on bare feet to the lilac bushes bordering the property line. The weeds scratched at her bare legs, but her feet were callused and impervious to the rough ground. She lowered her head and pushed through the foliage between the hedge and the tool shed so that she could not be seen from the house. She emerged into the back lot where the light danced to and fro impatiently, aware of her presence, and chiding her. She hurried to the back fence for a better look, but it slipped further away, again pausing and waiting for her to follow.

She climbed over the low wood fence and entered the stand of saplings spread across the base of the hill. She was halfway through the trees before she remembered that danger lurked here.

## Lord of Silver Ridge

Panic rooted her to the spot. Ellen, too, had been lured into the hills, her best friend, the only friend Abe had ever allowed. They had found her dead, sprawled in the dirt, naked as a jaybird with her throat cut to the spine. It was the reason Abe made her stay close to the house in fear that she would meet with the same fate.

She turned away, blinded momentarily by fright, and stumbled over a fallen wire fence. Impact with the damp earth knocked the wind from her. She scrambled to her feet, but a fallen branch snagged the hem of her nightgown, popping her right shoulder strap and tearing the seam of her gown from the hem to her armpit.

“Oh, no!”

She dropped to her knees and forced herself to take a deep breaths. Calmly, she freed the fabric of her gown and in that quiet moment heard the echoing drip of water from far, far below. Groping along the ground with one hand, her fingers encountered a rim of flagstone, and then a drop-off into nothingness.

Where had the cover gone? Childhood imaginings flashed to life in her imagination. Gnarled trolls scampered up the sides of the well and groped in the darkness to drag her screaming to a fate worst than death. She scurried back on hand and knees and climbed to her feet. She held the seam of her torn gown together and backed from danger. How would she explain herself if Abe caught her roaming the night half naked?

She heard it then, an urgent whine like an angered insect growing louder by the moment. She looked wildly about and saw the red light rushing swiftly toward her. Her fall had alarmed it, or it was taking the opportunity to attack. She had no way of knowing. With a cry, she turned

and bolted back across the fence, her bare feet pounding across the back lawn at a dead run. Only as she neared the safety of the house did she look back. She was close enough to the house now to scream for help.

Her scream would have awakened half of Silver Ridge, but the light was gone and her crisis defused. To prevent another one from developing, she stepped through the deepest of the shadows along the wall of bushes and tip-toed back to the sanctuary of her bedroom window.

A looming darkness separated itself from the darkness and blocked her way. Evie reeled back in shock. Lazarus stepped into the dim light cast by a distant streetlight filtering through the trees. "What you doing out here so late, Evie? You meeting a suitor in the woods?"

Lazarus was not as tall as Abe, their oldest brother, but he was half again her own height with long, stringy hair that fell to his bare shoulders. Eyes glazed with alcohol narrowed with evil glee. Evie tried to move around him, but he sidestepped to block her way and grinned wickedly with his thumbs stuck in the straps of his bib overalls. Trapped in the open, Evie was helpless, fair game for anything Lazarus had in mind, as far as Lazarus was concerned, even if he was her brother.

"Lazarus, you leave me alone. I'll scream. You know what Abe will do to you if you so much as touch me."

Lazarus chuckled amusement at her helplessness. "Yeah, but what will he do if he finds you sneaking about outside with your nightie all tore up like that? You got a suitor hankering for you out here after dark, Evie?"

"I got no suitor, Lazarus Darker. I heard something is all." She snatched a convenient story from the depths of her imagination. "It sounded like a puppy whining, lost

## Lord of Silver Ridge

and hungry. Abe lets me feed strays.” She lifted her chin defiantly. “You know he does.”

“You used that story once already. It won’t wash again.” His confidence faltered regardless. He wet his lips with his tongue and wiped his hands down his coveralls. His eyes roamed her body, pausing to take in pale flesh peeking through tears in the gown. In silence, he weighed temptation and its consequence.

Evie clutched at the torn fabric, trying to keep the curve of a bare hip hidden from view.

“Tell you what, Evie.” He edged forward and dipped his head, knowing she had the power to deny him. His voice softened. “Let’s you and me be a bit more friendly. You know I never meant to hurt you. Just let me be nice to you.” He reached out and ran a finger along the surviving strap on her shoulder. “You can scream if I hurt you, and then we’ll both be in dutch with Abe, and neither of us wants that. What do you say, huh?”

Another voice sounded from the darkness, a deeper, but softer voice. “It doesn’t sound like a good idea at all, Lazarus.”

Noah Darker stepped from around the front of the porch. He startled Evie so badly that she almost wet herself. Lazarus sidestepped into the shadows in a feeble attempt to hide.

Noah never smiled. His face was softer, not so mean-looking, but Evie knew he could be as dangerous as Lazarus in his own way, always wanting to do right by Abe. Noah was the youngest of her three brothers, but his age alone was of no consolation to her. If he tattled to Abe, Abe would beat on her and Lazarus both, and Evie feared

that Abe would hurt her bad some day. He was just too big to be gentle.

“Please let it go, Noah,” she begged. “I just heard something is all. I wasn’t doing anything wrong.”

Noah gazed at her for a time. He eyed Lazarus with far less tolerance. “Your beer’s getting warm, brother. Leave Sis alone.”

Lazarus glared back at the man, but the glare was a front for fear as great as Evie’s. He slunk away, defeated.

Noah eyed her distrustfully, but with none of the sick hunger that had been in Lazarus’ eyes. “Git back inside before Abe whups us all.” And then he, too, brushed past in ominous silence.

The back screen door slammed twice. Alone, Evie scanned the night one final time. The demon was gone, but her curiosity and her humiliation were too much to bear. She’d be ready for it the next time it made its appearance, regardless of what it was, or what it wanted of her.

## *Two*

**A**pproaching Silver Ridge at midnight was a blind drive along the edge of a cliff. The road dropped off steeply on the left, opening onto a vast, moonlit Silver Ridge Valley. A glimmer paced the car, a reflection from power lines dipping and rising between metal towers running along the shallow, rock-bottomed Silver Ridge River.

Richard Welk glanced out over the picturesque valley often as he drove. There was nothing at all to be seen of the dark foothills of the Appalachians looming over the passenger's side of the road. The hills there were black against a star-dusted sky.

Sarah Trevor stirred beside him. Her lithe body

whispered beneath royal blue satin and released an aroma of expensive perfume. “How much further, Richard?”

She had been sleeping since the turn-off at the Silver Ridge Nuclear Power Facility thirty miles behind them. Richard Welk nodded toward points of distant light visible from time to time on the winding road. “That’s Silver Ridge just ahead, isn’t it?”

She sat up and studied the lights, her voice mellow and seductive. “Yes, finally, thank God. You can see the house on the hill. Look at it, thirty-five rooms lit up like a Christmas tree. I tell you, Richard, it’s unnerving how eccentric Billy has become since the accident.”

Richard scanned along the horizon dead ahead and caught sight of the cluster of lights glimmering in the warm summer night. “Reminiscent of a castle overlooking a feudal village.”

Sarah gave a studious nod of agreement. “Some of the towns people do call it the castle. The Trevors were once known as the Lords of Silver Ridge, back before the silver mines ran out in the late eighteen hundreds and Howard Trevor Senior took his fortune to Boston.”

Eighteen ninety-four was the year that came to Richard’s mind. Trevor Industries had built a die-casting plant in Silver Ridge to maintain its presence in the county, and the plant had been modernized and expanded at regular intervals down through the years. Why? An explanation worked its way to consciousness. “The Trevors hail from hereabouts, if I remember correctly.”

Sarah threw him a prim smile. “Howard’s side of the family, not mine.”

“I’ve never had an opportunity to inquire on how one Sarah Peters became an integral part of Trevor

Industries.” It was a question he had been wanting to ask for years. “I hear stories, but they vary from source to source.”

Sarah sized up his request and shrugged off her reluctance to confide in her chauffeur and private attorney. He had become more than a mere employee in recent months. “We were partners at Harvard, Howard and I.”

“Classmates?”

She laughed unabashedly. “That, too. We screwed incessantly. Harold claimed that lots of sex helped keep his mind on business. I just thought it was great fun. We graduated together, class of nineteen seventy-two, and three months later, he contacted me with an offer of marriage. We had become physically addicted to one another, was his theory. It wasn’t a romantic notion, but close to the truth. By that time, Howard was taking his father’s place at the helm without much difficulty, and we shared a rather pleasant life together for the next twenty years.”

“I take it that’s privileged information.”

“You had better believe it, buster.” Sarah’s laughter was gentle music, but her sigh was unhappy. “It’s curious how life works, how one can take decades of success and contentment for granted, without ever truly believing that it can and will end someday. Now he’s gone, and all I have left to show for all of those years is an impossible burden of responsibility, forty years of fading memory, and a nineteen year-old son who’s pushing commitment to a psychiatric ward.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t sell those decades of success and contentment short. Nothing lasts forever.”

Her next sigh was one of exasperation. “The failing was Howard’s in the beginning. Emotionally, he was a very cool man. It became mine as I adapted to his ways. Twenty years is seventy-three hundred days. When I was grieving after the funeral, I bought reams of paper, one page for each of our days together. I stacked it in one big pile and tried to see how many pages I could fill with memories of our life.”

She shook her head and wiped a tear from her cheek. “There were so few of any significance. There was no passion between us. I should have kept my hands off the business. I should have spent more time with Billy from the day he was born.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself.”

“I suppose. I don’t have anyone else to pick on. You, perhaps.”

Richard drove in silence for a time, remembering his own reaction to Howard Trevor’s death. Trevor had been forty-five, less than a decade older than himself. The heart defect that had killed him had escaped the attention of the best doctors medicine had to offer. Howard Trevor had been an easy man to deal with considering the enormous power he wielded. Life within the circle of that power had been likened to a decades long cruise aboard a luxury liner that had sunk at sea and had left them all floundering in dangerous waters.

“Richard, watch out!”

A pickup truck blocking the highway loomed to view. Richard jerked the wheel of the limousine aside. Metal clipped metal regardless. Simultaneously, the left tire struck something dark sprawled on the shoulder of the highway.

## Lord of Silver Ridge

Richard slammed on his brake with Sarah's scream ringing in his ears. He broad-slid to a safe stop, paused a moment to collect his wits, then pulled to the shoulder of the road.

"Lock the doors," he ordered.

"Richard, no! Don't you dare go out there!"

He climbed from the car and locked his own door behind him. He glanced back when she tapped at the window and rummaged in the glove compartment. She rolled the window down halfway and handed him a flashlight, and then offered a chrome-plated nine-millimeter pistol.

Richard eyed the weapon gleaming in the moonlight and shook his head. The pickup they had clipped had met with an accident. A deer sprawled across the pavement, its belly burst open by the force of a collision with the pickup and its hindquarters crushed by the wheels of the limousine. The situation did not warrant venturing into the night armed to the teeth.

He turned to face the tragedy. "Damn," he murmured, bothered by the violence of the animal's death.

Dark shapes converged on him. Richard swung the flashlight to bear and pegged three men in its halogen glare, one old and bearded and two scrawny teenagers, all wearing suspenders, baggy pants and badly-stained shirts. One held a rag to a bloodied nose. All three scowled at him in anger.

The elder spoke. "Going to a fire somewhere, Mister?"

"We were driving at the speed limit," Richard said evenly. "Does anyone need a doctor?"

"You a doctor?"

"I can call for one."

One of the younger men roared laughter. “Don’t that beat all! They got a phone in that fancy car of theirs! Maybe they got a john, too!”

Richard narrowed his focus of attention to the elder. “How about if I give the highway patrol a call?”

“Try Sheriff Krueger in Silver Ridge,” the man said, his voice broken and unsteady. He sounded drunk.

“You gonna pay for hitting our truck and scaring the daylights out of our pa?” The younger man’s voice was shrill.

“And look at what you did to the hindquarter of that perfectly good venison you busted up,” the other ventured. “Krueger’s gonna nail you for screwing with the Fender boys, ain’t he, Pa?”

But the elder Fender was sizing Richard up for a more calculated kill. “Might at that. What do you say, Mister? Wanna settle out of court, seeing as how you almost nailed the three of us speeding like you was?”

Movement behind the windshield of the limo caught the attention of the youngest man. He ventured closer, peering with narrowed eyes through the dark glass. “Pa! Ben! Look at we got here!”

Sarah opened the door and rose into view with her diamond necklace glittering in the dim light and starlight highlighting the satin curves of her well-endowed body.

“Holy shit,” the one called Ben called out. “Will you look at that!”

“Back inside,” Richard said to Sarah.

Ben casually advanced on him. Richard took two deliberate steps forward in the hope that he could be as equally intimidating. “I’d advise keeping a healthy distance from the lady. She’s armed.”

Lord of Silver Ridge

Ben paused and looked doubtful. “Yeah, and you know karate and kung fu and a half dozen other Japanese words.”

“Wouldn’t Jessica look pretty in that dress, Pa?” the young one said.

“Go ahead and take it off her, Sidney,” Ben called out laughing, “but me and Pa get sloppy seconds!”

Richard had little experience dealing with threats of physical violence. He sensed he or Sarah would be easy pickings if they panicked. The three men inched their way into position, two to cut him off from the car, one to make a grab for Sarah. Richard turned slowly to keep Ben in view, hoping the man would misinterpret the twisted expression on his face as something more sinister than simple fear.

A tire on the stalled pickup exploded. The noise was like a cannon shot in the night, and for a moment, Richard thought that Sarah had indeed opened fire. The truck lurched. Dust settled from the undercarriage.

“Damn,” the elder Fender muttered after a bout of puzzled silence. “What the hell was that all about?”

Another tire popped, followed in rapid succession by the surviving two. Even Richard found himself backing away from the inexplicable phenomenon with a chill of apprehension.

A high-pitched whine sounded from the darkness near the fallen deer. All eyes turned to the animal.

The dead animal’s head rose a few inches off the ground, wobbling on the end of an obviously shattered spinal column.

The three locals reacted first. They turned in unison. With little more than the sound of their shoes shuffling on

the concrete, they vanished into the darkness at a dead run.

Richard resisted the impulse to follow, his heart pounding in panic. Sarah called out a window. "Richard, please get in the car. It's just Billy toying with those horrible men."

Richard glanced back at the carcass in time to see something metallic move into the underbrush.

"Richard, please! I can explain!"

Richard returned to the car. Once locked safely away inside the air-conditioned limo, some of his tension drained away. He looked to the woman for her promised explanation.

"You'll be able to judge for yourself soon enough. Please, drive on. I would prefer not to associate with vile men on dark highways at two o'clock in the morning."

Richard started the car and continued down the highway. He had driven less than a mile when a ruddy glow of light in the rear view mirror caught his eye. At first, he attributed the light to a stray reflection in the windshield. He felt his second chill of apprehension of the night when an object the size and shape of an inline roller skate pulled into view behind him.

"Sarah?"

Sarah twisted about in her seat to identify their companion on the dark highway. "It's just one of Billy's infernal toys. I warned you he was into that sort of thing."

"Robotics and remote control." Sudden insight took his fear away as abruptly as the punctured tires of the pickup had lost air. "I thought you were talking about toys."

"Well, they are!"

*Lord of Silver Ridge*

Richard eyed the speedometer needle pegged at sixty miles an hour. The toy just off his rear bumper had little difficulty keeping up with him.

“Richard, I told you Billy was a genius. His I.Q. Is completely off the scales. His doctors aren’t even certain it’s a normal condition, and the accident only made things worse.”

Sarah’s fingernails dug painfully into his arm. “I warned you about a number of things, Richard Welk. I suggest you keep them all in mind when we reach the house.”

## *Three*

**R**ichard judged the Victorian mansion to be large, but far from the castle he had imagined. It was the hill itself that loomed like some medieval fortress over the town nestled at its base. Approaching the edifice, he drove through a largely boarded-up and abandoned commercial district with a small residential area lurking in the darkness behind it. Yellowish lights twinkled through the trees.

A wrought-iron Gothic fence surrounded the base of the hill, but a gate opened as they approached, hinting that the twenty-first century had infiltrated the old Victorian property. Richard put the car in low gear to negotiate the steep drive. The limousine barely managed the sharp curves zig-zagging three hundred feet above the

## Lord of Silver Ridge

highway to the mouth of a large, four-car garage protruding from a face of rock below the house.

“Nice touch, don’t you think?” Sarah said with a strained smile. “I always did appreciate the courage of the architect who built this house.”

Richard pulled into the lighted garage and shut off the engine. The machine closing in from behind turned away before entering the circle of light cast from overhead fluorescents. The glow seemed to come from cooling fins mounted on an electric motor on the back of the machine. He had been briefed by Sarah about the Billy Trevor’s technological prowess, but had thought the details of the briefing the forgivable exaggeration of a mother trying to emphasize the best qualities of a troubled son.

Sarah threw open the door to the limo. “Follow me. I want to show you something before we visit Billy proper.”

Richard followed as instructed up a flight of cement stairs rising along the left, inside wall of the garage, enveloped by the wake of her perfume and captivated by the generous sway of her hips. The click of her high heels echoed in the quiet.

The door at the top of the stairs opened onto a ground floor hallway. The hallway, in turn, opened onto a lavishly furnished reception room with ceilings that soared to third floor skylights. Oak-framed doors positioned about the central room led into adjacent libraries, dens, and parlors.

Two curving staircases wound along opposite walls to the second and third floors of the mansion. Crystal chandeliers cast sparkling light upon plastic tarps thrown over the exposed surfaces of antique furnishings. Even paintings on the walls and knickknacks on tables and

mantles were neatly enshrouded in transparent cellophane.

Richard was puzzled. "Is the whole house sealed up like this? Where does he live?"

Sarah glanced at him uneasily. "Wait until you see. We have to go back down to the garage."

They backtracked to the subterranean garage. Richard had missed a ten digit keyboard mounted on the back wall. Sarah tapped five digits during the time it took Richard to correct his initial impression of the natural stone wall. He had been misled by a fiberglass simulation. A portion moved aside, and he gaped in amazement at the chamber that lay within. Indirect lighting from recessed fixtures shone across walls of stainless steel and a floor of black marble.

"This is Billy's hide-a-way," Sarah explained, "Billy's way of controlling his environment, according to Doctor Freud. And that's Doctor Heinrich Freud, not the original Sigmund. Even the Trevor fortune can't bring back the dead, unfortunately. Or perhaps not so unfortunately."

Curiously, the walls didn't quite reach the floor, and from beneath the gap, a machine emerged, a half-foot high device with tracked wheels and a single lens on a turret that spun once and focused on the newcomers. Richard smelled burnt metal and spotted the same array of cooling fins on the back of the device that he had seen glowing on the remote-controlled roller skate.

A young-sounding voice echoed from hidden speakers. "Mother. It's nice to see you back so soon. Do you remember the way?"

"Yes, dear, I remember the way."

Sarah made a quarter turn to face an opening door.

## Lord of Silver Ridge

She led Richard down a mirrored corridor and entered a chamber resembling a set from a science-fiction movie. Computer consoles, screens, and video monitors lined walls of polished steel. The video monitors showed views of the grounds outside, several in infrared. Some appeared to be views of highway intersections in and about Silver Ridge. On one screen, Richard caught a view of the deer carcass on an empty stretch of road.

Billy Trevor rolled into the room, a handsome young man of medium height seated in a motorized wheelchair. He looked younger than his photographs and stared up at his visitors with displeasure.

“Relax,” Sarah said. “You knew I wouldn’t be traveling alone, certainly not without my private attorney. God forbid I should say or do something that someone construes as a binding contract. Without your father, it’s all I can do to hold onto what’s ours these days. This gentleman is Richard Welk.”

Billy nodded acquiescence. “Welcome to my fun and games, Mr. Welk.”

“Fascinating. What was that machine that followed us in?”

“That was my mechanical legs taking my eyes and ears where they otherwise can’t go on their own.”

“I’m impressed,” Richard admitted.

“I’m not,” Sarah shot at him.

Billy smiled. “My mother considers my toys irrelevant. I suppose that comes from a maternal point of view, when a mother fears her son has gone off the deep end.”

“He’s trying to upstage me, Richard.”

“Want to see my machine shop?” Billy made the offer with a grin, knowing full well he had already succeeded. “I

have a few projects underway this evening. Things are really humming.”

“Sure.” Richard tried to hold his growing excitement at bay. “Is that it?”

He pointed to a monitor where a complex mass of gleaming machines churned away at a succession of parts passing along an assembly line.

“That’s where I do my stock die-casting and machine work.”

“Did you do that all by yourself?” Richard asked as casually as possible.

“No, of course not. The concept is mine, and all of the key manufacturing techniques, but I had the construction farmed out during the past three years. I’ve been in the hospital recovering from an accident, as I’m sure you’ve heard.”

Richard knew about the accident. Sarah easily anticipated his next question. “Billy is free to spend all the money he needs to indulge in his hobbies. Howard saw to that. Even I can’t stop him.”

Richard turned his attention to the boy’s wheelchair. According to Sarah, Billy had taken a liking to a local girl and had been terrorized by her three brutal brothers, one of which may have caused the automobile accident that left both Billy and the girl hospitalized. The girl’s injuries had been superficial. Billy had been left a paraplegic.

Richard gestured with a nod to the camera on treads still following them about like a living thing. “Why do they run so hot? I can smell the heat. The one on the highway that followed us in actually glowed in the dark. And what are they for?”

Billy touched controls on his wheelchair. He spun

about and taped a key on a console. Miniature machines poured from beneath the walls, machines with lenses and machines with pinchers, and others of unidentifiable purpose, some on wheels, others on tracks, and a few on insectile legs. The room filled with the smell of ozone.

Billy gestured magnanimously. "Most of these are security and self-defensive devices."

"Weapons?"

"They can shoot darts and high voltage electrodes."

"Like a stun gun."

"Exactly. Others are maintenance and surveillance drones and mobile tools."

And each, Richard noticed, moved with a life of its own. "Controlled by a central computer by radio?"

"For the most part, they operate independently," Billy said. "They have their own microchip programming, then some higher executive programming from the mainframe computers to fall back on. I'm at the top of the command hierarchy, of course. The fins aren't as hot as you'd think, just thin so they'll radiate more efficiently. We came up with this sulfur-lithium battery that suits our purposes except for the excessive heat, but we modulate the infrared emissions for communications purposes, so we're not at a disadvantage."

Sarah sighed in exasperation. "Told you so."

Billy wheeled his chair about. "Follow me. This will really freak you out."

Already too stunned to react, Richard followed the rolling chair through an opening door and down a dimly lit corridor. A side door a few meters away slid open, revealing the scene Richard had seen on the monitor, a densely packed chamber of machinery operating in almost

total silence. Partially assembled machines rolled by on a nearby conveyor. No two were exactly alike. The extent of the miniaturization and the complexity of the technology at hand left Richard feeling uneasy.

“Don’t be overly impressed,” Billy said. “It’s just a trick of metallurgy. We use an alloy of magnesium, which is soft and easy to machine. Exposed to gamma radiation, it hardens to a tempered state that outperforms even titanium.”

“Gamma radiation?”

“A modified irradiation unit used in the food industry,” Billy said evenly. “Most of the electronics I’ve had farmed out, but some of the stuff I’ve had to assemble here, especially the parallel programming processors. Modular components get assembled here by the computers, rather like a mail merge program feeding names and addresses to form letters.”

“You said we,” Richard reminded the boy. “We use an alloy of magnesium, you said. Who’s we?”

Billy and his mother exchanged looks. “Billy, tell the nice man who is helping you,” Sarah said gently.

“I find your attempt at an explanation endlessly amusing, Mother. Be my guest.”

Sarah turned to Richard. “The doctors say it’s a manifestation of MPS.”

“Multiple personality syndrome.” Richard tried not to look unsettled. “He has some sort of alternate personality?”

“It’s more than that,” Sarah ventured. “It’s more like possession, as far as I’m concerned. Unfortunately, I can’t imagine who or what is doing the possessing. I’m far from inclined to entertain religious notions. Even Billy agrees

that a certain degree of neurological injury must be at the root of it all. There's no simple explanation for it, as you can see for yourself."

Richard could feel his heart picking up its beat again, not that it had returned entirely to normal since the glowing roller skate had made its appearance.

"Then what?" he said. He looked to Billy for an answer.

Billy shrugged and grinned meekly. "I was in a coma for a few months. That's where I met him. In my dreams. Corin, he calls himself. He's from the future, from the twenty-third century, originally. From his point of view, I'm supposed to be a past personality, someone he once was and still has some connection with. I don't know what he wants with me. He hasn't been too specific as yet. But he helped with my toys, as mother calls them."

Richard glared at Sarah with unspoken accusation. This was more than she had prepared him for, more than he was qualified to handle.

"I have no complaints," Billy said. "These little gadgets keep me company. They give me something to occupy my mind and my time. The real key to our success is the programming that goes with the parallel processors. That's Corin's doing. The functioning of nervous systems of living things has more to do with fractals and collections of simple algorithms and a science called chaos than anyone imagines. Or so Corin says. His programming technique does seem to give my toys a respectable level of autonomous intelligence. At the same time, it's simple modular logic, once you get the hang of it. It's incredibly elegant."

Richard reeled with disbelief and confusion.

“We’re not here for explanations that go beyond a basic business education,” Sarah said angrily. “Richard, tell Billy why we’re here.”

Richard had difficulty switching tracks. “Billy, your mother wants you to return to Massachusetts with us. You were in therapy. Legally, if you refuse to cooperate, she can have you committed for psychiatric evaluation.”

Billy grinned. “You gonna help her do that to me?”

“I came along for the ride. And to lend some weight to your mother’s wishes.”

“Mr. Welk, doesn’t it seem odd that my mother hasn’t already gone through the usual legal channels to have me declared unfit to spend my father’s inheritance as I please? Instead, she brings her personal lawyer along to intimidate me. Want to know why?”

Richard looked to Sarah for an explanation. Sarah looked away, defeated.

“We’ve already undergone psychiatric evaluation. Corin was kind enough to keep a low profile. It’s true that I’ve been in therapy, but only for my physical disability. I’ve been declared legally sane.”

Richard turned to Sarah. “Is that so?”

“Judge for yourself,” she said bluntly. “How can I be expected to tolerate this situation?”

“If you’re legally helpless,” Richard said, “why did you allow me to believe you still had options to exercise?”

Sarah drew close and spoke softly, trying to exclude Billy from the conversation. “Richard, I was after the human element. I was hoping Billy would see you as something of a father figure. What else was I to do? I don’t want to leave Billy here by himself!”

Lord of Silver Ridge

Richard looked back to the boy for his feelings on the matter.

Billy held both hands out in a gesture of helplessness. "As long as you're here, I guess we're both going to be looking to you to mediate our conflict of interest."

"Billy, you're planning on taking revenge on those horrible Darker brothers," Sarah said a bit more stridently. "And it's my guess that you're even planning on getting back together with that skinny little sister of theirs!"

Billy raised an eyebrow. "All this for that? What for? Look at me?" He turned the chair to face Richard. "Hysterical paralysis, they claim." He slapped his thigh. "Numb as a slab of meat. They tell me it's all in my head." He chuckled nervously. "Mother's right in a way. I've got problems, but I've got to work most of them out for myself. Even Dr. Freud agrees. That's why I'm here. Still, I understand your concern. And Mother's. From your point of view, I would guess Corin's a bit hard to swallow."

"I'd have an easier time swallowing a Mack truck," Richard said with a raised eyebrow of his own.

Billie chuckled. "Nicely put, but I'm not planning on being here long. Give me some time and I'll go back to Boston peacefully."

"How much time?"

"I don't know. I just need to be alone for a time. Consider it part of my therapy. This is where it all started. This is where I'll end it."

Sarah whirled Billy's chair around to face her. "They'll just hurt you again!"

The boy sighed. "Mother, I don't want revenge on the

Darker brothers. And I don't think Evie would want anything to do with me in this condition."

Richard took Sarah's arm. "It's going to do more harm than good to try to force the issue. Perhaps we can bargain, reach an accord of some kind."

"What?" Sarah cried. "What in God's name do you have in mind?"

Richard looked about the room again. "All of this is pretty impressive. I don't think we need to be too concerned with your security set-up here, Billy. How much time do you need to do your thing?"

Billy considered in silence. "Not long. A month or two."

"How about four weeks?"

Billy shrugged. "Maybe. What happens in four weeks?"

"We return in four weeks to check on your welfare and negotiate a new deal. In the meanwhile, if Sarah has no objections, I'll give you a call now and then, just to assure your mother that everything is going smoothly."

Sarah looked displeased and suspicious. "You mercenary bastard, you're more interested in Corin's toys than in my son's mental or physical well-being."

Richard faced the woman, puzzled that she could take Corin so lightly. "These toys as you've called them may have more than a few patentable applications among them."

"And what about Billy, may I ask?"

"Allow me and Billy an open line of communication. I need time to make sense of all this. I'm out of my field of expertise, but so may be your illustrious Heinrich Freud."

"What form of communication do you have in mind?" Billy said quietly.

## Lord of Silver Ridge

“Surely you’re not out of touch with the outside world,” Richard said.

“Certainly not. I use e-mail to order things I need and exchange information with people who have been helping me with technical matters.”

Richard nodded his understanding. “Then we can communicate in that fashion.”

Sarah shuddered in horror. “Richard, didn’t you hear his change of voice? That’s not Billy. It’s that horrid Corin. We can’t leave him like this.”

Richard hadn’t noticed any change in the boy, except perhaps a slightly more serious attitude. “Sarah, if Billy has already passed a psychiatric evaluation, I won’t be able to get a judge to order another one without good cause. What do you want me to do?”

Sarah threw her arms up and turned away, pacing in the background while Richard handed the boy a business card. “My phone number, e-mail and fax. Don’t let any of these toys and that manufacturing process of yours get away from you. When you’re finished doing your thing here, let me put you in touch with Trevor Industries’ engineering department. In the meanwhile, keep a low profile. There are people who would take this all away from you, if you let them.”

Sarah reacted to Richard’s cold-blooded attitude with shock. Billy took the warning in stride. “Give me my four weeks.”

“What if the Darker brothers find out you’re here alone?” Sarah asked of the boy.

“They can’t get through my security, Mother.”

“You’re going to invite Evie up here. I just know you

are. You're going to start a relationship with that frayed little trollop again."

Billy put his hands on his legs. "What would I do with her? I haven't even been able to masturbate since the accident."

Sarah's countenance smoothed over to one of solemn determination. "Stay away from the townspeople. If I detect the slightest hint of trouble, I swear I'll find a way to have you put away for your own good."

Billy remained unperturbed. "As you say, Mother."

Sarah turned about and stormed from the chamber. Richard gave a final glance at the silent machinery churning about him.

"If Corin's not for real," Billy said quietly, "where did this all come from? Is that what you're thinking?"

Richard decided not to take the bait. "That's out of my field of expertise."

Billy wheeled his chair closer. "I may need someone to call in case of trouble, someone with a level head."

"I'm at your disposal, as long as you're not here to hurt anyone, or risk your own welfare."

"I'm not here to hurt anyone," Billy said. "I just need to sort out my feelings. This used to be our summer home. We were a family once, Mom and Dad and me. I came back for some peace and quiet. And some privacy."

Richard nodded satisfaction. "I can buy that."

"Can you calm Mother?"

"I can calm Sarah, but your mother does her own thinking."

"She's something else, isn't she?" Billy smiled. He turned the wheelchair aside and led the way back to the

Lord of Silver Ridge

garage, stopping at the edge of the concrete floor. "I'm glad Mother has you for a friend."

"It may be wise to allow her to be a mother from time to time, Billy. I don't think she feels she's been a good one."

Billy nodded agreement. "I won't take this any further than it has to go. When it's over, I'll come home."

Once in the car with the engine idling and Sarah at his side, Richard took stock of the situation. There was nothing more to accomplish. In order to help Sarah cope with the young man, he'd have to wean his way into Billy's confidence. He still had no clear idea of what was happening beneath the old mansion.

Richard backed the car from the garage, leaving the boy in the wheelchair a silhouette against the light of his underground fortress.

Sarah wept quietly as Richard wove his way down the hill and drove swiftly away from Silver Ridge. "I should have you fired, Richard Welk!"

Richard steered the car along the meandering road in the night. Even the moon had hidden behind towering clouds. "You would have difficulty replacing all my many talents and useful functions," he said, trying to keep the mood light, wondering what more she had expected of him. "Where would a new man begin?"

"Damn you, Richard Welk! Damn you and Billy to hell!" She took a deep breath. "And back again!" she added quickly. "I'll drag you both back by the scuff of your necks myself!"

## *Four*

**E**vie Darker heard of the rumors circulating about town while shopping at the dingy little grocery store along the main highway. Ella May owned the store. She was an older woman by Evie's standards, thirty or thirty-five maybe, but still very pretty. Abraham had never dated anyone else.

"The Trevors are back in the mansion on the hill," Ella May had told her.

The possibility imbued Evie with renewed fear that Billy had indeed abandoned her, or that he had been hurt and she would never find out how badly, because why hadn't he tried to get in touch with her if he was back? And yet the news startled her, because she hadn't thought to connect the twinkling ruby lights with the remote-

## Lord of Silver Ridge

controlled cars and airplanes Billy used to build and play with. How could there not be a connection? If Billy had returned, was he just watching her, wanting nothing to do with her otherwise? Had Lazarus ruined her chances of ever escaping Silver Ridge?

“Maybe it’s just those people who cut the grass and things,” Evie ventured. “They’re always up here in the summer.”

“Lights were on last night,” Ella May said. “And old man Fender and his boys had a run-in with a man and a woman dressed in fancy clothes and driving a big black car. They were older people, though. Still...”

Evie was too distraught to speculate. She paid for her groceries and kept her eyes to the ground on the way out, but she looked back at the ominous castle on the hill on the walk back down the highway. She paused for a time, watching for movement, but seeing nothing.

She returned home and put the groceries away in the kitchen of the grimy shack with tears flooding her eyes. Maybe Billy had been toying with her as Abraham claimed. Why would any of the Trevors want anything to do with her or her drunken brothers? The Trevors had ventured down from their hill only once in an entire century, and look what had happened? How could they not regret their foolishness?

She stood at the sink washing dishes and feeling claustrophobic and doomed. Her brothers returned home after work, and Lazarus stopped in the doorway behind her and stared at her. She pretended to be too busy to notice. Noah muttered and poked at Lazarus once or twice, but Lazarus ignored him. She didn’t hear Abe at all until his voice startled her badly.

“Evie, what the hell’s going on?”

Abraham’s voice was deep, the growl of the devil himself. A massive hand closed about her wrist when she ignored him out of spite. Her hand quivered in its steady grip. She dropped the soapy pot she had been washing back into the dishwasher.

“Lazarus, Noah, get your asses in here! Now!”

Evie waited in total resignation. Behind her, her brothers, who had fled, shuffled reluctantly back into the kitchen.

“What’s Evie upset about? What are you three trying to keep from me?”

Her brothers’ silence grimly amused her. Lazarus was terrified. She could hear it in his breathing.

“Noah?” Abe’s voice dropped an ominous tone. Noah was always the first to break, always the first to try to do right by his older brother.

“Evie was outside last night,” Noah said softly. “I caught Lazarus with her on the back porch with her nightie half tore off.”

Lazarus bellowed protest. Abe’s grip on Evie’s arm tightened, cutting off the circulation in her hand. Abe pointed a warning finger at Lazarus, cutting the man off in mid-sentence.

Noah continued. “I don’t think Lazarus did anything. I just told him to lay off giving Evie a rough time. The situation didn’t amount to much, so I just let it slide. Evie said she saw those glowing things again.”

Abe relaxed by slow degrees. “Let me judge what a situation amounts to. Lazarus, I’ve warned you.”

“I know that!” Lazarus shrieked. “I’ll never do it again!”

Lord of Silver Ridge

I told you a thousand times, I'll never do it again! Jesus, Abe, we were only kids when it happened!"

Abe caressed the back of Evie's wrist with his thumb. "She's your sister, Lazarus. Ma and Pa would have disowned you. I'll do worse if it happens again. You'll not dishonor the Darkers. We're all that's left, you, me, Noah. And Evie."

Lazarus fought to catch his breath. Evie felt mildly vindicated.

"You two git," Abe said. "I want to talk with Evie alone."

The two tripped over themselves escaping the kitchen. Abe let go of her arm. Evie rubbed life back into it without turning to face the man.

"Look at me, Evie."

She turned against her will and looked up. Abe was a monster of a man with shoulder length, stringy hair like Lazarus', but with a face less angular, more like Noah's. His eyes, though, were even blacker and more menacing than either of his younger brothers. He was older, and more mature, and a lot smarter.

"What happened?" he demanded of her.

"I saw one of them red lights again. I tried to follow it out back. I tripped over the old fence by the well and tore my nightie."

"And probably almost got yourself killed."

"Close to it, I suppose. It used to be covered up."

"I'll tell Sheriff Krueger to see to it before some kids fall in." He was silent for a moment. "I don't believe your story about the lights."

"I know you don't." Evie didn't like the quavering in

her voice. Neither could she keep a note of defiance out of it. "But it's the truth."

"You got a suitor, Evie?"

She shook her head emphatically. "I got no suitor."

"If you do, he's got guts. I'd give him credit for that."

"You'd hurt him!" she spat. "If I knew anybody at all, you and Lazarus and Abe would run him off!"

Abe contemplated the accusation. "I'd hurt anyone sneaking about our property in the middle of the night. So what was it, a suitor trying to get at you, or were you dreaming again?"

Evie clenched a fist. "I wasn't dreaming! I told you what I saw! I tried to catch it! I tripped over that old fence out back and tore my nightie, and that's all!"

Abe couldn't accept her story at face value. What would they be, little things in the night that glowed and smelled like burning metal? Even if Abe had smelled the odors, as Evie suspected he had, what could they be? And if Abe's imagination failed him, then Evie's demons could not possibly exist.

"If you have a suitor, Evie," he said, "I want to see him in the daylight. I want to judge him man to man. Maybe it is time for you to find yourself a man and get hitched. You're a pretty little thing. You deserve better than me and Noah and that bastard Lazarus and what he done to you. But if you need a man, I'll pick you one, someone to care for you properly. It won't be no one who would risk life and limb sneaking about on Darker property at night."

Evie burst into tears, knowing she was going to die in the house that was rotting away beneath all of them. She couldn't keep it clean. She'd never be able to escape. She didn't know where she would go, or what she would do if

Lord of Silver Ridge

she could escape. Lazarus would get her, or some other man who would do far worse than what Lazarus had done to her, and to Billy Trevor the night of the accident those three long years ago.

“Evie?”

She looked around, surprised that he was still standing behind her so quietly.

“We had some excitement around town last night. Old man Fender and his boys said a dead deer tried to get up and attack them.”

Evie curled her nose in disdain. Abe chuckled at her reaction. “Don’t worry. I’d never consider scum that like as suitable marriage material, but they told the sheriff a crazy story that’s been getting about town. What did you hear?”

“I heard the Trevors are back on the hill,” she said, still defiant.

Abe sighed and paced restlessly. “Fender said he hit a deer that all but wrecked their truck. They got out to look, and this big black car come tearing down the highway silent as a ghost and clipped their fender. There was a man and a woman in the car, but he wasn’t young enough to be Billy, so don’t get your dandruff up. Odd thing is, they said they bickered with the strangers, and the tires on their truck blew up, one by one, then this gutted deer with a broken neck started moving and making funny sounds. It scared the shit out of them. They made no bones about that.”

Evie stared at the man, slowly gleaning the nature of his concern. “Funny things are happening around town.”

Abe’s eyes widened in anger. “Funny things have been happening about town ever since they lit up the Trevor

mansion. Damn right funny things are happening. So I'm not being so harsh with you because of what you said you saw. In fact, if you see those lights again, I want to know."

Tears filled her eyes. "What if Billy's back?"

She could see Abe harden to the notion. "Don't go running up there on your own. Maybe Billy had the hots for you, but I wouldn't count on the rest of them giving you a very friendly reception after what we did to the boy."

Evie was shaking with suppressed rage. "Then what?"

"Then nothing. If he's back, he'll be a bit more discreet calling on you. He damned well better be. You know how Lazarus and Noah feel about those people. I can't always be around to keep them out of trouble. Evie, it's going to be a real sticky situation until they leave."

The mansion was always dark during the winter. If Billy was back, she'd hear from him within the next few weeks, or not at all. "If he calls on me," she said, "he'll want me to go away with him."

Abe took a deep breath, trying to stay mellow with her. "I'm right in the middle of some touchy business here in town, Evie. I can't afford trouble."

"Illegal business," she muttered at him. "Drug business with men from Miami. I hear you and Noah and Lazarus talking at night."

"Dangerous business, Evie. You're more likely than anyone to give me trouble, so I'll make a deal with you. If you hear from Billy, you let me know and we'll try to work something out. I don't want trouble with the Trevors again. They won't let us off the hook so lightly the second time around, not after what Lazarus done."

Evie didn't dare say more.

Abe glared at her, daring her to defy him. "You haven't

Lord of Silver Ridge

heard from the boy in three years, but that don't make Lazarus any less dangerous the second time around. Don't you forget that."

Abraham turned away and left the kitchen. Evie let out a shuddering breath of air, feeling shaky with excitement and dread. Had Abraham forgotten about the radio-controlled airplanes Billy used to fly about town, or was it just too far-fetched to think that red lights in the night might be the same thing? The next time it came to visit, she would have to be more careful of the fallen fence and the well, but she would have to investigate. Abraham was right about Lazarus. Being sober never made him any less dangerous. But she had to know what was happening before any of her brothers found out for themselves.

## *Five*

**J**ust before dawn, Billy Trevor sat in his wheelchair in the control room and reviewed the video recordings taken by the drones about town during the night. They were like mice, slipping from cover to cover in the darkness, getting into everything, exploring every nook and cranny. That was Corin's doing. His own programming skills could never have coordinated their movements so gracefully. Neither did he understand the need for such close surveillance of the dying little town.

The tape ended, and he shut off the monitor.

His thoughts wandered. He was thinking that Richard Welk would complicate matters. No one but his mother knew of the full extent of his activities in Silver Ridge. No one but his mother and Doctor Freud had known about

Lord of Silver Ridge

Corin. Welk would have dismissed Corin as a fantasy, but the attorney had recognized the value of Corin's technology. It was hard to guess how much trouble he might cause.

It was late, but he was too restless to sleep. Sitting alone in the control room, he put his fingers on the keyboard to a personal computer. "We've gone too far," he said aloud. He relinquished control of his hands by a subtle process of defocusing. Others would have thought it a light hypnotic trance.

I SENSE NO WEAKENING OF YOUR RESOLVE, his own fingers typed back to him.

He scanned the sentence glowing on the computer screen. It still startled him to have a part of his own mind and body talk back to him as a stranger. "You haven't done a really thorough job of explaining why this is all necessary."

I WARNED YOU THAT AN EXPLANATION WOULD BE DIFFICULT. IT IS ENOUGH THAT WE WILL BE ABLE TO RESCUE EVIE DARKER.

Billy gave a shuddering sigh. What else had he thought about during the past three years? But he had developed a few reservations along the way. "I don't think Evie would have much use for me like this."

His fingers clattered on the keyboard of their own accord. More words appeared on the screen. EVIE IS IN DANGER. IT IS ENOUGH THAT WE PROTECT HER FROM HARM.

Billy couldn't argue with that line of reasoning. It would be enough to take Evie away from Silver Ridge, to set up a trust fund so she could finish school and lead a

normal life. She'd do well, he was certain, even if he could not accompany her on her life's journey.

"Even so, there are four things standing in our way," he reminded Corin, "three brothers and a certain matter of paraplegia, hysterical or otherwise. The Darkers got the best of me first time around. If the doctors are wrong, if I never walk again, I'm screwed."

YOUR LEGS ARE NOT DEAD, Corin assured him. WE CAN AVOID THE DARKER BROTHERS AND HELP EVIE WITHOUT ENDANGERING OURSELVES.

"Then the party's still on? Mother and Richard Welk won't interfere with your own plans?"

NOTHING WILL INTERFERE WITH MY PLANS. WE WILL GET WHAT WE WANT IN THE END, THE THREE OF US, YOU, ME, AND EVIE.

"Unwavering resolve," Billy said.

OUR RESOLVE MUST NEVER WAVER.

"You've said that the danger Evie faces is in part the same danger we all face. I'd still like to know what that danger is."

I HAVE NO IDEA OF THE FORM IT WILL TAKE. IT IS ENOUGH TO STATE THAT EVIE WILL NOT ESCAPE UNHARMED IF I FAIL IN MY MISSION. NEITHER WILL YOUR WORLD AS A WHOLE.

Corin's long-standing claim sounded megalomaniacal. Doctor Freud had recorded one of their conversations mediated by a computer and word processor and had forced him to read the transcript aloud in group therapy. Corin had sounded insane, even to his own ear.

"You don't have much going for you except those little machines of ours," he said. "We scared that lawyer."

THAT LAWYER SAW PATENT POTENTIAL. HE SUPPRESSED FEAR FOR SAKE OF GREED.

Billy sighed, confident that the situation was still under precarious control. "How am I holding up to all of this, do you think?"

I HAVE ASSURED YOU THAT MY INTERVENTION IS FOR YOUR WELFARE AND THE WELFARE OF YOUR WORLD. I AM SELFLESS.

"I have only your assurances."

FOR THE TIME BEING.

"How will I ever explain you to Evie?"

Corin paused before answering. Bouts of silence always unnerved him. Billy feared that Corin would vanish suddenly and reveal himself as nothing but a figment of his own imagination.

EVIE IS AN INTELLIGENT YOUNG WOMAN. SHE WILL UNDERSTAND.

"Let me handle Evie," Billy said quickly. "Please don't try to talk to Evie on your own. You'll only frighten her away. She could never understand."

His fingers remained still.

"Corin, please."

ALLOW ME TO DO WHAT I MUST FOR EVIE'S WELFARE.

"I rather you let me know what you are planning ahead of time."

I CANNOT ALWAYS INFORM YOU OF WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE, THE RESCUE OF YOUR MOTHER ON THE HIGHWAY EARLY THIS MORNING BEING A CASE IN POINT.

Billy had to concede to Corin's reasoning. Corin had blotted out his existence to attend to the emergency. He

would not have been able to work so swiftly, or think so clearly under pressure.

I WILL NEVER CLAIM TO BE BILLY TREVOR, Corin typed. THAT IS YOUR GREATEST FEAR, THAT I MAY PRETEND TO BE YOU AND TAKE OVER YOUR LIFE.

“You’ve taken over a good portion of it already.”

ONLY TO THE EXTENT I NEED TO INSURE OUR SURVIVAL, AND THE SURVIVAL OF THE WORLD THAT YOU KNOW, AND YOUR RETURN TO A NORMAL EXISTENCE.

Billy had to laugh. “Yeah, thanks. Doctor Freud would have loved that one.”

REMEMBER THAT I CAN BE BLOCKED.

The reminder startled him. It was true. He could block Corin’s rapport in any number of ways. Drinking alcohol would do it, or popping an occasional tranquilizer.

But if he lost Corin, he’d be helpless. He’d have to return to Boston, most probably back to the hospital. If he left Silver Ridge now, he would lose Evie forever, even if the world didn’t end as Corin claimed it might.

“We’ll do it your way for now,” he said.

I’LL VINDICATE MYSELF IN THE END, Corin typed.  
TRUST ME.

## Six

She hadn't heard the approach of the little machine. She hadn't smelled it coming, maybe because of wind stirring the trees outside. She had been lying curled beneath her blankets wide awake in the night, waiting, but it had taken her entirely by surprise.

"Billy's back."

The voice cut off Evie's breath.

"*Can you hear me?*" it said.

She was shaking like a leaf. "I can hear you."

It sounded like a voice coming over a transistor radio. She lifted her head and turned to face the window, trying to make out the object squatting on her window sill. It looked like an oversized insect, except that reflections of light from the highway gleamed along edges of shiny

metal. Fins on the back of the machine glowed a ruddy crimson in the dark.

She could smell its heat, but it was only a machine, not a demon from hell after all.

“Billy, is that you?” she said softly, hoping her voice wouldn’t carry too far in the stillness of the night. It was past midnight. Abe and Lazarus and Noah were probably asleep, but the walls of the old house were thin.

“Billy is afraid you’ve forgotten about him since the accident.”

Then it wasn’t Billy speaking after all. Evie buried her face in her pillow to muffle her sobs of anguish. It had been a living hell waiting for some word of what had happened to him, how bad he had been hurt, and why he had never tried to contact her in all the years they had been apart. “It wasn’t his fault!” she cried out. None of it had been his fault. If he never wanted to see her again, how could she blame him?

“Surely.”

She sat up in sudden agitation and turned on her table lamp, determined to have a close look at the device before it escaped her again. She half expected it to dart away in the light. It stayed put this time.

At close range, the machine was far less imposing than the unknown she had imagined. It was an obvious human construct rather than the biological monster she had imagined. It was the sort of thing Billy would do, build a little radio with legs through which to speak with her rather than brave his characteristic timidity and risk a face to face confrontation.

“It’s you,” she accused the machine. “Billy, you can’t fool me.”

Lord of Silver Ridge

*“A friend as close as a friend can get,”* the tinny voice said, *“but not Billy.”*

Evie knew with a sinking despair that it spoke the truth. Though it sounded like Billy’s voice, it wasn’t saying the things Billy would have said to her.

*“You and Billy belong together,”* it said. *“It was unfortunate you were separated. Billy should never have been hurt.”*

She stood with her fists clenched at her sides. “Who are you?”

“I have known Billy since the accident.”

“What do you want?”

“Billy needs you. There is danger here.”

“Abraham won’t let anyone hurt me,” she said defiantly, not knowing if she liked the idea of talking to a stranger who could sneak around in the darkness with impunity, even if he was a friend of Billy’s.

“There is more danger than you know.”

“So what do I do, just run away from my brothers?”

The voice paused before answering. *“If you can.”*

Evie calculated her chances of escape. Abraham had half the town convinced that she was some helpless half wit. “I’m afraid to try,” she said.

“Then Billy and I will help.”

“I want to talk to Billy first.”

“That can be arranged.”

She cocked her head suspiciously, but hope flared anew in her heart. “I want to see and talk to Billy face to face. I want to see for myself that he’s okay.”

The machine was silent for a moment. *“Then you must come up to the house.”*

Which was exactly what she dared not risk. If she

tried and failed, Abe would take away even the little freedom he allowed her.

Fear began seeping through her fading hopes. Maybe it wasn't Billy up at the house at all, but someone trying to lure her up to the old mansion for purposes far more sinister than a reunion with an old friend.

The machine crouched suddenly. It leapt and was gone in an instant, a fraction of an instant before a baseball bat arced through the glass of the window from the porch outside and shattered its rotting frame. Evie screamed and brought her covers up to protect her face against a shower of glass fragments.

"Goddamn!"

It was Lazarus' voice, a shriek of rage and even terror.

"It stung me! Goddamn, it hurts!"

Abe and Noah stormed from their beds. She heard one go out the back and the other out through the front door. Both men demanded an explanation in a roar of anger and fear as they converged on Lazarus standing on the porch in front of her window.

"It was a one of Evie's demons!" Lazarus cried. "I saw it! I tried to kill it and it stung me. Jesus, it hurts, Abe!"

Abe hit the man. She heard the sound and the shuffling of Lazarus' feet as he careened backwards out of control and hit the ground.

And then there was silence, and harsh whispering. "We can't afford trouble now," Abe spat at Noah. "Look around. See what you can find. What the hell, go get a few men from the tavern to help you. Tell them we had a prowler."

"What about Evie?" Noah queried.

Evie quavered with terror, waiting for Abe's decision.

Lord of Silver Ridge

“I’ll deal with Evie. Take Lazarus with you. Find out what the hell this was all about. Lazarus, the next time I catch you outside after dark, I’ll break your fingers, one by one, every last goddamned one of them.”

Evie curled into a ball on her bed and lay stricken with terror, waiting for Abe to come crashing into her room. His footsteps pounded through the house. He smacked his fist against the door and banged it against the wall. “Put something on that won’t get all tore up.”

Evie put on blue jeans and one of Noah’s old shirts that hung half way down her legs. Abe was pacing in the living room with a flashlight clutched in one hand. “Where did you see this light of yours?”

Evie pointed back toward her bedroom.

“I mean the other night when Lazarus caught you outside. Where did you see it go?”

She nodded toward the back of the house. “In the woods.”

“Show me.”

Evie took the lead, going out the back way and retracing her steps through the back yard to the woods beyond the fence. She pointed to the downed barbed wire around the old well barely visible in the light that seeped through the trees from the highway. “That’s where I fell. I saw the light up on the hill a little.”

“What the hell were you doing, following it?”

She nodded reluctantly. “It wanted me to follow.”

Abe frowned, shook his head in disgust, and swept the flashlight along the ground. The tavern was only a block or so down the road. She could already hear men’s voices taking to the woods in search of prowlers.

She saw a flicker of crimson light from somewhere ahead. "There!" she cried.

Abe lunged forward and scanned the underbrush with unexpected urgency. "Don't see nothing," he muttered in frustration.

Someone cried out from no more than a few hundred yards. "Goddamn, it stung me! Motherfucker, it hurts!"

Evie grabbed a fistful of Abe's shirt. "There!"

Abe saw it this time, a twinkling red light moving slowly in the dark ten or twenty yards away. His reaction puzzled her. He stood straight up and he relaxed with a sigh. "Yeah, I got it this time. What the hell is it?"

Evie wanted to confide in him. "It ain't no demon," was all she dared say.

The confidence in her tone of voice caught his attention. He looked down at her. "What then?"

"Some kind of little machine."

"Billy Trevor's toys?"

She shrugged, increasingly frightened by the notion. "Billy played with toy airplanes and cars."

Abe fumbled for her hand and held on tight. He half dragged her through the trees toward voices ahead. He stopped when a group of flashlight beams and dark figures emerged from the trees.

Evie caught sight of another red light darting swiftly off to one side. Someone cried out in pain.

"Jesus!"

A string of obscenities followed.

"It's shooting needles!"

Abe pulled her back against the trunk of an old oak as three red lights zig-zagged past at a speed no man could match in the darkness. Evie heard the whine of their little

Lord of Silver Ridge

motors. They moved up the hill, only occasionally visible through the heavier underbrush until they disappeared completely.

“They’re getting away,” Evie said, hoping the hunt in the darkness would now end.

A gunshot sounded in the near distance.

“Put that thing away!” Abe roared. “You damned fool, you’ll kill someone!”

Noah and Lazarus and a few other men came stumbling past, some drunk enough to trip in the shallow erosion ditches running down the hill, one or two too drunk to get up without a helping hand.

“Idiots,” Abe muttered. “All right, go on back! They’re gone!”

Voices calling through the darkness passed the word along. Most went willingly, disgusted by the farce of drunk men panicking over nothing. Only a few had actually seen the lights. At Abe’s urging, they, too, turned back rather than go in pursuit alone. The injured lagged behind, picking slivers of metal from their flesh and unable to convince the others of the intensity of the pain they suffered.

Lazarus emerged from the darkness with tears in his eyes. “It stung me, Abe. It hurts like hell, worse than a godblessed wasp sting.”

“Lightning bugs,” Abe said.

Lazarus started in disbelief. “What?”

“Half of them are drunk enough to believe anything you tell them. Quiet them down, Lazarus. Keep them the hell out of the woods until I get this mess figured out.”

“What the hell were they, really?”

Abe ignored the question and turned away, far more

shaken by the incident than he was going to openly admit. He clutched Evie's hand even tighter on the way back to the house.

"What the hell were they!" Lazarus called out from behind them.

"Trevor's doing," Abe muttered, turning to face Evie in the light cast by the kitchen window. "What else could it be? It's got to be Billy Trevor."

Evie shook her head, but Abe ignored her.

"As soon as he comes for you, you damn well better let me know. Let me deal with him my own way."

"I will," Evie lied. "I promise."

"It'll be for the best for all of us."

She nodded frantically.

He let her go. Evie rushed back to her bedroom and tried to lock her broken door. Her anger at Abe's stubbornness peaked in helpless rage.

The little machines couldn't possibly be Billy's doing. Billy would have been more open with her. The thing that had spoken to her had been mysterious and unnerving.

She curled up in the middle of her bed. *As soon as he comes for you*, Abe had said. "As soon as *who* comes for me?" she whispered to the darkness.

## *Seven*

**E**lla May closed up the grocery at eight each evening. The day following the excitement in the woods, Abe walked to the store just before she locked the doors. He entered through the back way so as not to be seen by the townspeople and serve as fodder for gossip. Gossip always seemed to work against him, never to his advantage. His campaign of ridicule against the lights in the woods had failed. All eyes would be on the mansion by now.

Abe locked the door behind him as Ella May was turning off the lights up front. She retreated into the back and gave a start of fright before recognizing the tall figure standing in the shadows.

“Why did you lock the door?” She drew closer with a nervous smile. “I told you no more fooling around in here.”

His voice was an unhappy growl. “I wanted to talk with you, is all.”

She sighed, tossed her purse to a nearby table, then perched herself on a corner of it as an afterthought. “Talk about what?”

“About those men who got stung last night. I talked to old Doc Parkinson. He says Lazarus and the others got welts to back up their claim. He’s not saying what caused them. There’s lights in the Trevor mansion. Evie’s upset. Lazarus is behaving worse than a stirred hornet’s nest. They spell trouble for me, Ella May. I can’t afford trouble.”

“Not from what I hear, Abraham Darker.” Ella May’s voice was gentle, but chastising, reminding him of his tenth grade school teacher. She, too, had spoken curtly to him, but with that light in her eye warning of animal passions lurking beneath the surface. “I hear rumors of business dealings with men from down south. They don’t sound like honest business dealings to me.”

“Don’t pass rumors about, Ella May.”

She tilted her chin defiantly. “I keep my mouth shut about things that don’t concern me.”

“Nobody in Silver Ridge is in harm’s way, Ella May. If we got business with southerners, it’s just stuff passing through on its way elsewhere. If it didn’t come through here, it would go through somewhere else.”

“It’s evil money, Abraham.”

“Every bit as evil as poverty, Ella May. This town can hardly feed itself.” He gestured to the boxes lining the room in the shadows. “There’s stuff here you can’t sell because people don’t have money for even a little luxury.”

Lord of Silver Ridge

“Poverty can have its dignity.”

“Well, we’ve argued about dignity before, I reckon. I never completely lost the argument, now did I, about what’s dignified and what’s not?”

She looked down at the floor in embarrassment. “We all have to scratch our itches from time to time. Maybe I’m far from a pure woman in the eyes of the Lord, being intimate with a man that’s not my husband, but we’re talking about different things, and you know it.”

Abe smiled, amused by her stubbornness. Their feelings for one another would never be undermined by differences of opinion.

His smile faded as other thoughts intruded. “What do I do about Evie? She’s been a nervous filly ever since Ellen got her throat cut, and I don’t rightly blame her. You already know about her and Billy Trevor and what Lazarus done to them. What if Billy’s back like everyone’s saying?”

Ella May gestured with a nod in the general direction of the mansion. “Go up and check for yourself. If they don’t like it, Sheriff Krueger isn’t going to arrest you for knocking at a door and asking polite questions. If the Trevors are really up at the house like everyone says, maybe they’d be pleased to meet you. You’ve never had the opportunity to apologize for what Lazarus did to that boy. You said you wanted to do that eventually.”

Abe pursed his lips and nodded. It was nerve-racking wondering if the Trevors would come after the Darkers some unexpected day for what Lazarus had done to Billy the night Lazarus had found Billy and Evie together at the old mill. Or had their revenge already begun? Maybe the evil little machines were Billy’s doing after all. Maybe

before it was all over, they'd close the die-cast plant in retaliation as well.

"Regardless," Ella May said. "Let Evie go."

She said it softly. Abe looked at her in surprise.

"Let her go before Lazarus hurts her. Let her go before she tries to kill herself. She's going to have a nervous breakdown sooner or later, Abraham. You and Lazarus and Noah put her under too much pressure."

"It's not that bad with us, Ella May. We're family. We're all that's left of the Darker name."

Ella May's eyes widened with anger. "Lazarus raped her, committed incest, and somebody in this town murdered her best friend!"

"I told her I should find her someone to marry her proper."

"That's not the way it's done! Let her choose her own husband! If it's Billy Trevor, let her go to him!"

Abe radiated cold anger. It was hard to take disagreement for something so personal.

"You can't keep her caged like some little bird," Ella May said. "Even mothers have been known to smother their own children trying to hold them too tight."

Abe shrugged, willing to concede the point for the sake of avoiding an argument. "If I let Evie go, what about Lazarus?"

Ella May stared at him with fire in her eyes.

"You know how dangerous he is," he said. "I don't want to have to hurt him."

"You'd better be more concerned about Evie."

There was so much to think about. Everything was all tangled up like a mass of intertwining vines. He could

## Lord of Silver Ridge

never hope to separate one from the others and deal with them one at a time. He sighed. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

Ella May was silent for a time. When he glanced up at her, there were tears in her eyes. "What?" he said. "What'd I do now?"

"Let Evie go. And let Lazarus and Noah go. Abraham, if they can't live without you, they're younger than you are, and they're going to outlive you. They have to learn to stand on their own feet sooner or later. Wean your family before it's too late for us!"

Abe moaned in renewed misery. All too often of late she was bringing up the same subject to bicker over. "It's just not a good time for me right now," he said.

"I'm thirty-three years old!" she cried. "In another few years, we can't even count on having a healthy baby! What are you going to do then, dump me for some younger girl to have your sons, or risk an end to the Darker name altogether?"

Abe stared at the floor again, alarmed by the weight of Ella May's logic. "You know I'd like nothing better," he pleaded. "You know that!"

When she began weeping, Abe opened his arms to comfort her. Ella May grabbed her purse and scurried back into the shadows. "Don't you dare get mushy with me! We'll just start messing around and you won't let me go until morning, and we'll both stink like pigs, and I'll have to work all day without any sleep. I told you we weren't going to do that anymore, not until we're married proper."

Abe stood staring at the outline of her body in the shadows. She was what he wanted most in the world. Her every argument was like a hammer smacking away at the

head of a nail and never once missing. Aside from Evie, Ella May was the only person on the face of the earth who could make him feel warm and loving.

“Don’t look at me like that! Abe, I said no!”

With Ella May, he could be himself, a brute and a tyrant, and it never seemed to matter to her. He reached for her and she dodged half-heartedly. When his hand brushed against her breasts, he hooked four fingers between the buttons of her blouse and pulled her into the light.

She whimpered protest, but perspiration beaded her forehead. He had to smile at the way her uncombed hair framed her pretty face like a dark hood. Eyes like jewels caught glimmers of light from overhead. The astonishment on her face was for her own uncontrollable passion, not for his uncouth behavior. It had pleased him to no end when she had told him once that no other man had ever aroused her so. “Please don’t tear my clothes,” she said without emotion even as Abe proceeded to rip her blouse open and reach for the warm body inside.

“I will,” was the last thing he said for the balance of the evening. It was a promise she extracted from him each time they made love. He would be a proper father to any children he fathered, and proudly so.

And then Ella May proceeded with quiet desperation to try to make it happen.

## *Eight*

**S**arah Trevor stirred languidly in the night. In all of his personal existence, the cat-like stirring of that supple body was Richard Welk's favorite thing. Her gentle movement brought him awake.

Just enough light filtered through the blinds from the Boston skyline to illuminate unidentifiable contours of her body. He drew his tongue along a section of soft skin, relying upon the quivers and undulations of her body to determine exactly what flat area of her anatomy he was dealing with.

Sarah gasped in reaction and looked down between her breasts. Richard had to look up to meet her astonished gaze. "Richard, you are a truly wicked man."

"I dare say, the lady doth protest too feebly."

“Just don’t you dare get perverted right now. I want to speak with you professionally.”

Richard lay his face back down against her stomach. “Shoot.”

“I’m worried about Billy. We should have done something. I wanted to bring him back with us.”

“We had no means,” Richard reminded the women. “If the boy is mad, his insanity is more devious than any sanity you and I can bring to bear against it. Your husband foiled you, Sarah, by putting so much money at his disposal.”

“It was a conditional fund, Richard. I had no idea Billy would be so ungodly resourceful in using it.”

“He’s legally an adult.”

“I know that.”

“Is he self-destructive?”

“No, of course not, just unpredictable. And eccentric. He has no social skills, Richard. He’s not good with people. I hired an agency to investigate Billy’s accident. I know the kind of people he involved himself with, that Evelyn Darker and those horrible brothers of hers. Richard, they’re animals.”

“Except that the girl was hurt, too, and it seems unlikely that her brothers would have tried to kill their own flesh and blood. It could have been an accident, just like Billy claims.”

“Billy isn’t telling the whole truth. At least his story never met with my satisfaction.”

Richard smiled. “From what I’ve read of his story, Billy and little Evie were doing things that mothers don’t get told about.”

“Regardless, I’m afraid he may be in danger.”

Lord of Silver Ridge

Richard respected her concern. “He’s safe enough if he stays put in that house.”

“How can you assume that?”

“Read your own security reports. Silver Ridge is practically deserted, except for the people working in the die-casting plant and their families, and the specs for Billy’s bunker read like a military debriefing. The Darker brothers may be animals, but it would take a technician to get into that house undetected.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Richard crawled up into her warm arms and held her gently. “I know I’m right.”

“He’s not a violent boy.”

“I agree, but he’s smart. I’ve seen a receipt for a pharmaceutical shipment that went to Silver Ridge a week ago. It included a few cubic centimeters of a venom extract of the Portuguese Man of War.”

Sarah tensed. “A jelly fish?”

“A jelly fish that can kill.”

Sarah pushed him away and sat up abruptly.

“People have drowned getting stung away from shore,” Richard said. “I don’t know how lethal the venom is otherwise, but I know it’s incredibly painful.”

“Billy has ordered poison? What on earth for?”

“Darts for his drones would be my best guess. Remember what he said? Some of the drones were for his self-defense, darts and stun guns.”

She shook her head nervously. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

Richard tapped the surface of the nightstand alongside the bed. “You take for granted your nine millimeter pistol tucked away for your own self-defense.”

“Of course I do.”

“But Billy’s avoiding the use of deadly force to defend himself. Minor considerations of that nature put me at ease. I’m flatly in awe of that son of yours, maybe a bit uneasy, but not because of a gang of badasses living in Silver Ridge.”

Sarah sighed and lay back down. Richard stretched out alongside her, absorbing the unconscious movements of her breathing and restless stirrings.

“Richard?”

“Hmmm?”

She scooted back down into his arms. “Maybe you’re right, but I can’t help worrying about him. I’m too nervous to sleep now. You know how I am when I’m nervous.”

“A nag?”

She cuffed him lightly.

“Horny, then.”

“You’re so crude!”

He nipped at her throat below the ear, feeling her body come alive beneath him. “Want anything in particular?”

Her warm breath washed against his ear. “What were you doing down there when I woke you up?”

“We apparently got all tangled up, Sarah. I was just trying to reorient myself.”

Her body leaned against him, a certain sign of growing urgency. “Let’s get all tangled up again.” She put her lips to his ears. “Do something perverse.”

“If your husband’s ghost is watching...”

She cuffed him again, harder. “He wouldn’t. My husband, rest his soul, was a gentlemen.”

“And me?”

Lord of Silver Ridge

“You’re just my lawyer.” Her laughter was like music in the night. “This is what I pay lawyers to do, to screw people on command.”

Minutes later, from the depth of her passion: “Please check on him soon. Don’t let them hurt Billy again.”

## *Nine*

**A**braham Darker's pickup truck approached from Silver Ridge. Billy Trevor had less warning than he had planned. An early shower had muddied a few camera lenses hidden about town. Only one of them logged the approach of the truck and set off warning beepers. When the old Ford Ranger pulled up to the gate, Billy sat before his monitors, indecisive and frightened.

Abe's voice rang through the control center over the intercom. "I know you're in there, Trevor. Let me in. I want to talk to you about Evie."

Billy opened the gate at the base of the hill, then spun about in his chair. "Attend!" he called out, and a small army of wandering sentinels converged on him from all corners of his underground quarters. They followed him

Lord of Silver Ridge

into the elevator. When it opened onto the spacious morning room of the mansion, they rushed ahead and spread across the polished wood of the ground floor.

“Alert!”

They spun about in unison to face him.

“Conceal!”

They resumed their random motions, but stopped beneath the cover of furniture whenever they reached an adequate hiding spot. Within minutes, they became invisible, unless one knew where to look and what to look for.

Abe pounded at the door.

“Enter!”

The door opened of its own accord. Abe stood in the glare of sunlight like some primitive warrior reluctant to enter the lair of an unpredictable enemy. Clearly intimidated by the size of the house, he ventured a step inside, then paused. Billy noticed how well the man concealed his moment of fright when the door closed behind him.

Abe then relaxed as unselfconsciously as a cat. He stepped from beneath the lower ceiling of the vestibule into the magnificence of the ground floor reception hall and took in the twin staircases, the overhanging balconies and the skylights streaming sunshine. He then shifted his attention to the single inhabitant of the room. He drew closer and offered a tentative nod of greeting to the young man in the wheelchair.

“Abraham,” Billy said, aware of how soft and feminine his voice sounded in contrast to Abraham’s guttural bass. The man was a walking terror, six and a half feet in height, broad across the shoulders and narrow at the

hips. Clenched fists hung at his side. He had his head cocked slightly to one side, and his straight, black hair hung in an unkempt mass across his right shoulder. His angular face and brow framed eyes as dark as midnight.

“We’ve only met once before,” Abe rumbled. “I warned you about Evie. You must not have listened too good.”

“You said her brothers wouldn’t take kindly to strangers courting Evie. You didn’t say that one of them would try to kill me.”

“That was Lazarus’ doing. He got beat good for that. That’s part of what I wanted to talk to you about. There’s never been bad blood between the Darkers and the Trevors. We’ve worked for your people for a hundred years, clean back to my great grandpa’s day. We never meant for Lazarus to do what he did to you. We thought for sure you’d send the police after us. I’d like to know why you didn’t. Are you planning on getting back at us yourself? Is that why you came back?”

“I’m not here for that,” Billy said.

“Then you came back for Evie, except that I don’t want to see our sister used and discarded by people who think themselves better than the Darkers.”

Billy sat rigid in his wheelchair. He had not wanted to discuss Evie so soon, not until he could deal better with his paralysis. “I’m not sure I’d be in Evie’s best interests as things stand. I came here because it was the only place I could be alone. I used to come here during the summers before the accident.”

Abe nodded absently. “You flew them radio-controlled airplanes. The kids loved them. I never held it against you that you courted Evie, except that I was afraid of what Lazarus might do. I’m not always around to keep him out

Lord of Silver Ridge

of trouble. Lazarus has got funny feelings toward his sister. But, like I said, there's never been bad blood between our people."

Billy had to cut through the hesitant silence that followed. "What do you want? Does Evie know I'm back?"

Abe glowered with anger. "Don't play games with me."

Billy grew suddenly agitated. What was happening that he didn't know about? Was it something Corin had done without his knowledge? "I don't understand..."

"Evie says they're machines. Machines that sting like hornets and glow in the dark and run as fast as rats. It don't seem likely, but who else but you could be responsible?"

Billy took a deep breath and tried to hide his upset. That had to be Corin's doing. Corin was acting behind his back again. "I don't think I would have been able to leave here without at least trying to talk to her," Billy said, reaching for words that would mollify the man. "I should have talked to you first. It just never occurred to me to try."

Abe nodded satisfaction with that response, but he paced about restlessly. "I've got important business going in town. I'm going to get in over my head if I can't keep things under control. I sure as hell can't afford trouble with you."

His tone of voice was suddenly conciliatory. "I've kept the Darkers together all these years. Now people are telling me that it might not be for the best."

Billy waited out the torturous pause. Abe was taut, nervous.

"I'll make you a deal, Trevor. If you want Evie, I'll bring her to you and give you my blessing, but only on two

conditions. One, take her and leave Silver Ridge. Do it now, before things get out of hand. I'm sorry you got hurt, but what's done is done. All I can do is to keep it from getting worse. And treat Evie with respect. Bring her back to me if she wants to come home. If you hurt her, you'll answer to me."

Billy nodded tentatively, too confused by Abraham's behavior to do more than accept what was offered. "If that's what Evie wants, I'll agree."

"That's the way it's going to be. You got a Darker's word on it."

Abe turned and left the house. Billy waited until Abe was gone, then released his pent up anger in a cry of anguish. The little machines swarmed from concealment and formed a semicircle in front of his wheelchair.

"Billy..."

Billy jammed his fists against the side of his head. "No! I told you never to talk to me inside my head!"

Billy went back down to the control room and brought a word processor up on a spare computer with which to communicate with Corin.

His cry sounded like a woman's scream. "What in God's name do you think you're doing!"

ACCLIMATIZING EVIE TO CIRCUMSTANCES TO WHICH SHE MUST ADAPT, his fingers typed.

"She'll never come back to me under these... circumstances!"

I REMEMBER EVIE FROM MY OWN PAST. SHE IS MORE VERSATILE THAN YOU KNOW.

"Versatile? *Versatile*, for the love of God?"

ADAPTABLE. RESILIENT.

Lord of Silver Ridge

Billy's agitation grew by leaps and bounds. "How can you remember Evie from your past? Evie is now!"

ALL MOMENTS IN TIME ARE NOW, BILLY.

"I've heard enough of the metaphysical bullshit! Corin, you had no right!"

I REMEMBER EVIE, BILLY. WHAT MORE CAN I SAY? SHE'S IMPORTANT TO YOU. MY MISSION WILL FAIL IF EITHER OF YOU COME TO HARM.

"And what happens when she gets here?" Billy's hands were shaking so badly, he feared Corin would not be able to type out a response. "How are you planning on introducing yourself?"

Corin remained silent for a moment, always an indication of deep thought or indecision on his part. WE NEED HER WITH US.

"That's not an answer to my question!"

WHEN MY MISSION IS FINISHED, I WILL LEAVE. YOU WILL HAVE EVIE TO YOURSELF.

Billy lifted himself halfway out of his chair. His cry of anger echoed through the empty bunker. "What am I supposed to do with her! I can't walk! I can't feel anything below my waist!"

His fingers twitched, anxious to deliver a response on the keyboard. Billy stuffed them between his unfeeling thighs. "No, no more right now. Just don't push me too far, unless maybe you've developed a taste for Thorazine and shock treatments."

Billy managed a cold chuckle of triumph for whatever his petty victory was worth. "We don't want to go through that again, do we?"

Corin fell promptly silent within him. Sarah and her new boyfriend knew how he and Corin had outwitted the

psychiatrists. They'd quickly become his worst enemies if they saw him and Corin engaged in a power struggle. Escape would be far less likely should they fall into the good doctor's hands under those circumstances.

Billy leaned his head back in the chair. He closed his eyes and basked in the merciful silence. Maybe, just maybe, they were right after all. Maybe he wasn't sane.

Neither one of him.

## *Ten*

**A**braham refused to say where he was going the Saturday morning he visited the Trevor mansion. He left in a sullen mood and spun the tires of the pickup all the way to the highway. Unsettled by Abe's odd behavior, Lazarus and Noah stayed close to the house during the course of the morning. They were waiting in the drive when Abe finally returned home. Abe left the truck and confronted them in the middle of the driveway.

"I've spoken with Billy Trevor. There won't be any more trouble between the Darkers and the Trevors. If Billy agrees to leave Silver Ridge in peace, Evie goes with him without any quarrel on our part."

Lazarus looked astonished. Astonishment gave way to an expression of utter desolation, and then to rage. Abe

was shrouded in a complete calm when Lazarus attacked him.

Lazarus sprang for Abe's throat. Abe backhanded the man with reflexes quicker than either brother had ever managed to best. Lazarus went down with blood spilling from his mouth.

Abe dragged Lazarus to his feet by the collar of his shirt and calmly sank his fist into the man's gut to take what fight was left out of him. Lazarus collapsed to the ground a second time, this time with a spark of fear in his eyes. He crawled to the back porch gesturing his willingness to concede.

Abe turned to Noah to assure himself that he had only one stubborn brother to contend with and not two. Noah was as much a maverick as his brother, but he possessed more self-control, and he had always been willing to let his older brother guide the family along the rough paths of life.

"Listen to me," Abe said. "The both of you."

Lazarus looked up in anguish. Noah's expression was unreadable.

"We've got to settle this, but I don't want Evie to hear." He gestured with a nod to the truck. "Get in. We're going for a ride."

Noah climbed into the cab alongside Abe. Lazarus chose to ride in the bed. Abe drove to the die-casting plant on the north side of town, the Trevor plant that had employed the Darker family for four generations. A seventy-year-old retiree standing guard at the chain link gate let them in without question, without even making eye contact with the three Darkers.

Abe drove around the back of the metal frame

## Lord of Silver Ridge

building and used his key to disarm the alarm and open a door. The three entered the dark expanse of the shipping department with echoing footsteps. Abe went to where a conveyor delivered machined and polished compressor cylinder heads to the packing area. During the week, three packers worked off to one side, assembling and taping cardboard shipping boxes. Four Styrofoam spacers were placed in the bottom corners, and in each box, a cylinder head was slipped down to rest on the spacers. Four more spacers were placed in the upper corners and the flaps closed and sealed. The box was then loaded aboard trucks for destinations throughout the northeastern regions of the country.

Abe held up a foam spacers marked with a blue dot. What appeared to be inexpensive Styrofoam was actually a strong polyurethane foam. “We all know what’s inside these. We three and Bentley and Jenkins and Mr. Severson and our illustrious shipping foreman, Ziggy.”

“I don’t know what that shit is,” Lazarus muttered unhappily.

“That’s because we live in God’s country, not in some dirty city filled with whores and drug addicts. It’s cocaine, and some heroin from time to time. It’s a powder made from plants like you’d grow in your back yard, but it does weird things to your head, and you can’t stop taking it once you start. So we don’t give a damn what it is, except what it’s worth, sometimes thousands of dollars an ounce. You know what an ounce is, Lazarus?”

“Not very fucking much,” Lazarus growled.

“An ounce will get us jailed in a federal pen if anyone finds out we help deal in it. That’s assuming a man named

King doesn't find out we messed up our end of the operation first, in which case we're dead."

"We know all about that," Noah protested.

"Let's just make sure we understand one another. We're backwater hicks playing with the big city boys. If things run smooth, we'll give the Trevors a run for their money someday. If things get fouled up, King will take his business elsewhere. If he does, he'll cancel you, me, and Lazarus along with our contract. I hear that King is crazy. He watches too many stupid movies. I hear he's got false teeth made of titanium, and that he's ripped out a man's throat with them."

Noah grimaced. Lazarus sneered with disbelief.

"All right, so maybe it's bullshit, a scare tactic, or maybe it's the truth and he's completely wacko. He runs a big operation regardless, and he's given us a choice between more money than we've ever seen before, or a long, slow rot in the grave."

Noah at least understood Abe's concern. "Lazarus knows what's good for him. He just forgets that things don't always go his own way."

"Lazarus forgets too often," Abe said, "but I know damned well you're none too pleased yourself about letting Evie go with a Trevor."

Noah faked a grin. It came out pale and sweaty. Lazarus wanted Evie for himself, regardless of what the world thought of his incestuous obsession, but Noah hated the Trevors with a passion for other reasons. It was a hatred that had been growing since the day he had found his father dead at the gate to the Trevor mansion.

Zeke had been drunk the night he died. Noah had followed him to the Trevor castle where his father had

Lord of Silver Ridge

gone to beg for his job back. A blizzard had been blowing hard during that bleak and gray winter evening. That had been back in the days when Howard Trevor spent Christmas at the mansion with his wife, Sarah, and their nine-year-old boy, Billy.

Zeke had staggered into the path of an approaching limousine. At the age of eleven, Noah had watched his father knocked to the ground. The front tire of the car had crushed his skull, and the undercarriage of the vehicle had torn the clothes from the body before the chauffeur had responded to the shrill cries of the only witness to the accident.

The experience had broken Noah in some subtle way. Noah believed that the Trevors deserved to die for what they had done to his father, any and all of them, including Billy.

“Forget it,” Abe said, sensing Noah’s train of thought. “What’s done is done. We can’t undo it. All we can do is screw ourselves over even worse, in which case we’ll die like Pa died, probably even worse. The Trevors aren’t worth it. Evie’s not worth it.”

Abe took a breath and tried a different approach. “We can’t hold what happened to Pa against Billy Trevor. He was about your age when it happened, Noah.”

Abe looked to Lazarus, willing to try one last time to reason with insanity. “Evie’s your sister, Lazarus. You can’t have her. Best to remove the temptation and be rid of her entirely. Best for her and best for us.”

Abe glanced between the two men, anxious for an accord. “Noah?”

Noah nodded. “Whatever you say, Abe.”

“Lazarus?”

Blood still leaked from Lazarus' mouth. He wiped it on his shirt sleeve and turned his head aside.

"Have it your own way, but cross me again and I'll have to deal with you. You've had all the warning I'm going to give."

The three returned home in the truck. Abe sent the two off for a beer at the Silver Ridge Saloon and went alone to Evie's bedroom. The door was locked, but the lock had never held against his anger, regardless of how often he repaired it.

Wood splintered, and the flimsy door fell open. Evie backed against the far wall, her dark eyes bright with fear. She was a tiny thing, not like her brothers at all, but she had Darker eyes set in her delicate, heart-shaped face. She looked like a doe, rather pretty, but too scared to be fetching, in Abe's opinion.

"I know that you heard that I struck a deal with Billy Trevor."

"I heard," she said gently, and as defiantly as ever.

"Don't cross me, woman. You wanted that boy once. He's still got money, even if he's useless in other ways. Take what you can get and run with it. You ain't got no future here."

His voice softened. "You ain't got nothing but hurt here, Evie. I'm giving you your freedom. Don't fear it. And you never did have to be afraid of me."

She blinked back tears and just stared at him with quivering lips.

"Do you have anything to say to me?"

She shook her head nervously.

Abe sighed, saddened. She had a great deal to say to him, if the truth were known. She was a Darker and his

Lord of Silver Ridge

only sister. Somewhere deep inside them both, they loved one another desperately. Abe had protected her since childhood, but Ella May was right about the harm he would do if he took it too far.

“It’s late,” he said. “I’ll run you up to Billy in the morning. Pack your things, whatever you want to take. I’m damn well sure he can buy you anything you don’t have.”

Abe turned away, but he looked back just outside her door. “It is what you want, isn’t it?”

Evie managed a faint smile and nodded frantically. “It’s all I’ve ever wanted.”