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SHADOW OF DARKNESS

Leslie Kohler

Growing up in the shadow of Folsom Prison, home to some of the most notorious criminals of all time, I knew life would prove to be daunting. The confines of that monolithic granite structure stood within shooting distance of our house—just over the ravine that cut across the front half our property. Looking at the prison’s turret from my bedroom window, with its silhouetted guard, the barrel of his high powered rifle constantly trained outward, always sent prickles of fear down my spine.

Whenever I misbehaved, my mama never had to breathe a word. She simply cut her eyes to the kitchen window and nodded her head in the direction of the tower. I’d stare wide-eyed at the ever-present fortress as her subtle gesture screamed, “That’s where we toss the wanton and wicked.” For a ten-year-old growing up in the Northern California countryside during the early fifties, nothing seemed scarier.

I’d scurry to my room on my slender, colt-like legs, yellow ponytail bobbing frantically behind. Flopping onto the bed, I’d stare out at my prison guard, giving him my meanest scowl. Then I’d squeeze my eyes, tight, and push the image of that awful prison out of my mind.

Silently, I vowed to be a good girl—no more naughtiness. Next time Mama asked, “Who ate all the Hershey bars?” I’d tell her, “I did,” instead of blaming my little brother who always got sick after a few bites of chocolate, anyway. When I spied a pile of pennies lying on my daddy’s dresser, I’d leave them there, instead of spilling them into my overall’s pocket. It wasn’t that I was a rotten kid. I always tried to muster good intentions. But the lure of forbidden temptation always seemed to waylay my resolve.

Sometimes after one of my failings, like nibbling the frosting off one of Mama’s freshly baked cakes, Daddy would plunk me down on his knee for a heart-to-heart talk. Issuing discipline not one of his strong points, he’d usually end up chuckling, “You know, Princess, I can’t get too angry with you. You’re a lot like your great-grandpa Gilmore. I do believe you inherited his spunk. You’re growing up so fast. And pretty—I’ll be out shooing the boys away with my shotgun soon.”

“Oh, Daddy.” I’d blush.

It was because of Granddad Gil that we lived so close to the prison. After he died, we moved into his spacious three-story ranch house he built in the late 1800s. Our home sat high on a hillside, dotted with oak trees and blanketed in grassy brush. The lands surrounding us grew lush in the winter from our plentiful mountain foothill rains, which turned dry as straw during the arid summer months. A spacious veranda, bordered by a whitewashed railing surrounded the russet wooden house. Rolling hills rose all around, providing my sisters, brother and me, plenty of room to romp and explore. The perfect setting in which to grow up—except for the dreaded watchtower perched on the knoll across the way.

Great-granddad Gil built the house here in order to live close to his dream project. One he had envisioned for many years. He planned to build a dam across the nearby American River, to harness its roaring waters, in order to create hydroelectric power. The electricity generated would be fed through miles and miles of overhead lines, all the way to the former gold rush town, now California’s bustling state Capitol, Sacramento. Nowhere in our country had anything like this been accomplished before. Granddad Gil’s project loomed so large, it would change the history of our river valley forever.

Once Granddad Gil began building Folsom Dam, construction costs soared sky high. Though local granite quarries provided readily available building materials, this project required thousands of hours of manpower. Paying these wages would cost a bundle of money, even for someone as wealthy as my great-granddad. Begrudgingly, he postponed work on the dam until he could figure out where to find cheap labor.

For a couple of years, Granddad Gil attempted to round up enough laborers willing to work for modest wages, but because of the dam's location, it turned out to be tougher than he thought. He decided the only way he could make his project affordable would be by using jailhouse inmates, so he made a deal with the State of California to provide him with jail labor in order to finish the dam. The only problem being, back in 1878, the only settlement near the proposed dam was nothing but a bedraggled mining camp named Stoney Bar. Its tiny population housed a few criminals, but nowhere near the number needed to build a dam.

Granddad Gil wouldn't let that stop him. He decided if the prison labor was too far away, he'd bring the inmates to him. From his vast land holdings, Granddad gave the Golden State five hundred acres overlooking the dam site on which to build a prison. Once the state completed the penitentiary and moved the inmates in, Granddad Gil put them to work constructing his dam.

Granddad's dream took thirteen years of backbreaking labor. Growing up, I heard stories about prisoners losing their lives while constructing the enormous project, and rumors passed down telling of the prison guards' harsh treatment of the chain gangs that hoisted the massive granite blocks into place. Hearing of these atrocities always made me wonder whether my granddad was a ruthless opportunist, or a victim of vicious rumors.

One day as my daddy stretched out in his easy chair to read the Sunday paper, I asked him, "Why do people tell such terrible stories about Granddad Gil? They can't be true, can they?"

"Don't listen to those tales, Princess. The truth has a way of clouding over as stories are told over and over through the years. I don't recall too much about Granddad. What I do remember, though, is that he always seemed like a fair and compassionate man."

"They aren't just things people say. I read about it in a book at the prison museum."

"It's the same for the written word. History has a way of changing, according to who's doing the telling." He smiled at me and tweaked my cheek. "Just believe in the ones you love. Have faith. I know I do."

Faith. I knew I believed in my daddy. Nobody listened to me more carefully or had a kinder heart. If my Granddad Gil was half as compassionate as my dad, then he was okay by me. I just had to have faith that I could live up to my daddy's good expectations. I vowed that the next time I faced the decision to go with the good angel or the bad, I would pick the good one. At least I hoped so. Otherwise I might find myself staring down the rifle in the tower.

Mama bustled into the parlor, a picnic basket hooked on one arm and a pile of old blankets in the other.

Daddy eased me off his knee. "Here, Mother, let me help you with those. Didn't realize it was time to leave for the river. Why don't you round up the kids while I grab my fishing gear? Princess, go check and see if your sisters have tacked up the horses."

Mama, Daddy and my brother rode in the old Ford pickup that had been around ever since anyone could remember. It had been built before the smooth paving of modern roads, and its heavy chassis could handle the ruts of the dirt road that wound through our property down to the American River. We owned newer cars, Mama's a shiny red station wagon, and Daddy had a black, high-finned Cadillac, but the truck was kept in reserve for trekking across our property.

My sisters, Linda and Trudy, trailed along with me, behind the truck on horseback, coughing on dust kicked up by the truck's tires. Riding tall upon my favorite gelding, Shiloh, I turned to my oldest sister, Linda, and said, "Race you down to the river."

Flipping back her neatly braided pigtail, she snipped, "Dad said to follow behind them."

"Yeah, but I'm sure he didn't mean *all* the way down to the river."

"Yes he did."

"Boy, for an eighth grader, you sure act like a sissy pants."

Linda glared at me. "I'm going to tell Mom you're calling me names."

"What if I tell her you've been kissing boys? I saw you smooching Kenny Stevens behind the barn."

"Liar. I didn't kiss Kenny." Looking to my middle sister, Trudy, Linda said, "You know I wouldn't kiss that yucky Kenny. Right?"

Trudy huffed, "Of course not."

Looping my reins across the horn of the western saddle, I crossed my arms and grasped my shoulders like I was being hugged. Giving my lips a smack, I cooed, "Oh, Kenny, you kiss sooo good. But of course you *are* fifteen."

Linda shot me a look meaner than the ones I'd imagined glaring out from the gun toters in the prison's watchtower. Glancing to Trudy for some sibling support, my middle sister wimped out and stared straight ahead at the dirt road. Being born between two stubborn heads like Linda and me often meant keeping her nose out of our business.

Gathering the reins, I kicked Shiloh's sides with the heels of my boots, urging him into a canter. Picking up speed, I tore away from my sisters and passed the truck, racing the wind all the way to the ridge overlooking the American River. Only then did I slow down so that my horse could safely take the steep grade of the trail that led down to the river's edge.

I found the small, sandy beach that was one of the few spots along the water not covered by gray river rocks, where my family liked to picnic. Leading my horse to the water, I coaxed him to drink. Then I tethered him to a shade tree and lay down on the cool, moist sand. Closing my eyes, I listened to the babbling waters cascade over the rocks, gathering force as it tumbled downstream.

I heard the truck rumble to a stop on the hillside above me, and my family's voices as they ambled down the hill. Heavy footsteps thudded across the hardened ground to where I lay.

Uh, oh, I thought. Mama's feet stomps sounded real mad this time. Maybe I should have stayed behind the truck.

Opening my eyes, I peered into the unsmiling face not of my mama, but my daddy. The skin stretched tight across his jawbone, quivering ever so slightly. He opened his mouth to speak, then stopped. He glared down at me, squeezing his hands open and shut. When he finally addressed me, the words sounded sharp, clipped, like he would explode if he were to let it all out.

"Melissa, how dare you disobey me. I've told you never to ride out here alone."

"But you were right behind me."

"Not close enough. The road's all torn up from the spring rains. What if your horse had tripped in one of the ruts?"

"But Daddy—"

"Quiet, or I'll give you a spanking!"

"But—"

Daddy turned around and stomped down to the water.

Tears welled in my eyes and dribbled down my cheeks. I rolled away from my family, not caring how the tears mixed with sand ground into my skin. I waited that way a long, long time. Although I'd never seen my daddy so angry, I knew he couldn't stay that way for long. Any second he would return and take away the sting of his words with a kiss on my forehead, a tousle of my hair, and speak the words, "I love you, Princess."

Instead, I heard my family frolicking in the water, laughing, the buzz of Daddy's fishing line casting out and reeling in. Then Daddy calling out, "Hey, Linda, I thought you wanted to learn how to fish. Come on over here."

My temples throbbed and my head felt like it would split wide open. I had to get out of there. Somewhere quiet, where I could be alone and think. I picked myself up and crept over to Shiloh, untied the reins, and hoisted myself up into the saddle. With a gentle nudge, I turned my horse toward home—the ride back blurred by a barrage of tears.

When I returned to my house, I untacked Shiloh and put him in his corral. Shuffling up the path that led from the barn to our front porch, I wiped the sandy grit from the beach, and tears off my face. When I reached the front door, I noticed it stood wide open.

Stupid Linda must have forgotten to close it.

I padded up the stairs and headed into my bedroom. Pausing in front of the bureau mirror, I pulled the windswept hair from my ponytail and ran my fingers through the thick mane, loosening the tangles. I prodded at my puffy, red eyes, willing the aftermath of the tears to go away.

A gust of air blew through my open window, ruffling the laced curtains that had yellowed over the years. The warm breeze surrounded me like a smothering blanket, and I shut the window to block it. In the quiet of the house, I gazed at the guard in the tower.

My solitude was broken by the sound of rustling from the back of the house.

What was that? Is somebody here? Or just some pesky squirrel that snuck in through the open door?

Silently, I crept down the long hallway, ready to turn tail and run if it was a squirrel. It wouldn't be the first time a wild animal had broken into our house. Once my mom found a possum rummaging through the kitchen cabinets.

Easing my way into my parents' bedroom, I spotted a man searching through the dresser against the far wall. He stood naked, except for his underpants. He had thick, black-cropped hair, with some sprouting across his back.

Barbs of fear riddled my body. Stabbing, electric jolts.

Discarded at his feet lay a crumpled, blue cotton shirt and faded jeans. I knew what these clothes meant—I'd seen men wearing them in photographs at the prison museum.

The man turned around. He stared at me with coal-black eyes. Fire eyes, burning into mine. Face, battered with pockmarks. Rivulets of sweat trailed down his temples and chest. His breath, fast. Panting like a dog.

"Well, lookie here, a pretty young girl come to welcome me out of the slammer. What's wrong sweetheart, you never seen a man in his skivvies?"

A wave of fear seared my body. With quivering legs, I backed toward the door. My limbs could barely move. Like swimming through quicksand.

In a rush of steps that belied the man's stocky build, he rushed past me and slammed the door shut. Grabbing my hair with his fist, he twisted my head so I had to look up into his

hideous face. My hair felt like it was being ripped from my scalp. I struggled back my cries of pain.

“Don’t you got no manners? Tryin’ to leave on me. I’ll show you how to act, little girl.” He pushed his face in close, bared yellow teeth clashing against mine. Smelly saliva splattered my skin. Barely releasing me from his clutch, he pulled his lips into a snarl, his hot breath covering my face.

I heaved and a wave of vomit erupted from my throat, spilling down my chin.

He shoved the back of my head, forcing me across the room. I lay sprawled on the floor.

“You’re gonna’ help me. I need to borrow some of your daddy’s clothes, so’s I don’t look like no escapee. Where they at?”

“My...my daddy keeps his clothes in the closet,” I said, scarcely above a whisper. Watching the man, I slowly stood up. “I’ll get you some.”

With trembling hands, I fumbled through the clothing rack, grabbing a white T-shirt and dark jeans. I felt my way along the back corner of the closet, nervously clutching a cold, steel weapon. I tucked it into the back of my pants. Handing the clothes to the man, I brushed past him, making a beeline for the door.

He snatched my arm with a vice grip, killing my hope of escape. Then whirled me around. Pulling me close, his stomach crushed against my chest. Hard. Muscled, like it could hurt you with its touch.

In a gravelly voice he said, “Where ya’ goin, honey? Looks like your daddy didn’t do his job schoolin’ you how to mind. Guess I’m gonna have to be the one to teach ya’.”

I tried to wrestle away, but he only held me tighter, stinging my arm with his cruel grip. The coarse hair covering his body poked into my face. His slimy sweat soaked my skin. I twisted my head to the side, trying to get a breath of freedom.

He sneered. “Got some spunk, huh? I like that.”

My eyes darted around the room, searching for anything that could help me, trying to unlock my arm to grasp the weapon. Trying to gather my courage. Looking through the open window across the ravine, I spied the ever-present guard with his rifle aimed outward.

I sent a silent plea to the guard: Please, help me. Don’t let this man hurt me.

Though I had felt as if the guard’s eyes were always on me, I now realized this wasn’t true. He stood stock-still, the rifle’s barrel resting in the crook of his arm, eyes unwavering, guarding only the grounds surrounding him.

Gulping air, fighting back tears. I turned my head upward, and peered at the evil man.

He lowered his face to mine.

I scanned the blackness of his eyes. They were dark as coal. Except for the outer corner of his left eye—it held a spot of red, a drop of blood next to the pool of darkness. Like a scar from a distant accident. One that refused to go away.

With choked words, I said, “You’re not gonna hurt me, mister.”

His eyes grew darker. “What’d you say?”

“I said ‘you’re not gonna hurt me.’”

“Why you say that?”

“Because you don’t want to. You’re just so used to being mean, you don’t hardly know how else to act.”

“Why you...you don’t know nothin’ about me. Sittin’ up here in your big fancy house. You got no idea what my life was like.” He hitched his head toward the window. “Why I wound up

down there.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean growin’ up like an animal. Beat down all the time.”

“Lots of people get beat. They don’t grow up to be convicts.”

He glared at me hard. “How dare you talk down to me. Looks like you need a good whippin’.” With powerful arms, he pushed me away, and I fell back over my parents’ bed.

Stomping to me, hovering above, sides heaving like an angry steer, he seethed, “You don’t know what it was like. A drunk for a dad. Used me as his personal whippin’ boy. My ma just let him at me. I couldn’t do nothin’ right. I learned real good. Now, you’re gonna.”

“I know how that feels,” I mumbled.

He scanned the lavish furnishings of the room. “The heck you do.”

“I’m always getting in trouble for something. Even when I try to be good. But my daddy doesn’t beat me—”

The sound of the old pickup coming up the drive stopped my words. I rolled across the bed and ran to the window, yelling, “Daddy! Daddy!”

The man bolted toward me, rage bleeding in his eyes. Whatever good was ever in him was gone. I pulled the gun from my waistband and raised it—shooting straight into that bloody eye. His head snapped back and he fell to the floor. A sickly dark liquid oozed from his eye. Trembling, I let the gun slip from my hand and cried.

The next thing I remembered was my daddy’s embrace. I shook so violently I couldn’t get my mouth to speak. By the time I calmed down enough to tell my story, a bloody trail flowed along the bedroom floor—like a river of death.

Daddy picked up the gun and speared a second shot into the convict, in the exact spot I had fired. Then he called the prison warden.

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Word came out that the escapee had been killed by my father while trying to defend me. My daddy was exonerated.

We also learned the escapee’s story. He’d been in and out of prisons since he was a young man, until he landed in Folsom for life. He’d killed his father.

I think about the dead convict every time I look over at the watchtower and wonder if that evil soul had dreams when he was young. Goals he wanted to reach out and grab, work for, struggle to achieve. Like my Granddad Gil did so long ago when he dreamed of harnessing a wild river. And I wonder what that man’s life would be if he’d chosen a different path. Hadn’t grown so mean. Maybe if he’d known a daddy’s love, like I was so fortunate to have. My daddy may have been tough sometimes, but I knew he always loved me. Unlike the prison convict who never felt love. But life deals us what we get. And we make our choices.

There is no one guarding you from a tower.

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