

# The Uninvited Guest

by Jane Hammons

We go where we go because of who Tayber knows. In Albuquerque he knows a woman named Opal. She lives in a rundown Victorian and rents out rooms to people like us. Opal also has a little girl, something he doesn't tell me until we exit the freeway.

The first time I see her, she is slouched in a tire swing, pushing off with one foot and dragging the other in the dirt beneath a dying pecan tree that probably hasn't made a nut in 20 years. A colorful mess of sweet peas and hollyhocks swarm the trellis that leans up against a falling-down garage. Chickens peck their way through the litter in the yard.

Tay pulls into the driveway and hesitates before he cuts the engine. He doesn't want to leave the tail end of the cherry 1972 Mustang in the street, but there's a beat up Ford Lariat taking up most the driveway. From the swing the girl watches Tayber get out of the car and head up the splintered wooden steps of the front verandah. She calls out, "Wait." So he does.

"Opal doesn't shoot up in front of Connie," he hollers over his shoulder to me. Like this makes her Mother of the Year. Tayber turns on the heel of his lizard skin Luccheses, boots he bought with our baby money, and comes back to the car. "Let's go. We can come back later."

Connie checks the watch fastened to her arm with a bright pink band. She hops out of the swing and walks toward us. "Won't be much longer."

"I am not waiting in this heat," I tell Tay. July, noon, it's at least 100 degrees.

"We'll be back," Tay says to Connie.

"Can I come?" Connie rests her forearms on my open window frame and gives me a snaggle-toothed smile. Her tangled black hair needs brushing.

"I guess so." I look at Tayber for confirmation. I'm not supposed to make decisions.

"Tick tock. Rox's clock."

Tayber can be mean. It hasn't even been a year since we ran a surrogate mother scam. I had a baby. Promised it to three couples, gave it to one. All of them paid. That's how we got the wad he's getting ready to blow on drugs.

"Lydia." I stick my hand out the window and give her the name I'm using.

She gives my hand a grown-up shake. "Connie."

"Come on if you're gonna," Tay says and starts the engine.

"Let's go to Lotaburger," Connie says.

Tay shoots her a look in the rearview mirror. "Don't be so bossy." He lowers his voice and says to me, "Just like Opal."

There are things I don't know about this trip, but I do know drugs are involved. I don't do or deal, so I told Tay to leave me out of it. "I like green chile on my burger. How about you, Connie?"

She smiles at me. "Double cheese. Chocolate shake."

I laugh. This is a kid who knows what she wants.

Connie pokes her head between the seats. "You have a nice car, Tayber."

"He wishes."

"Shut up, Rox."

"Lydia." I remind Tay of the name I'll be using while we're here. He's the one who doles out the ID, but we've pulled so many little jobs lately that he has a hard time remembering who I am. We are making a sweep across the straight line borders of the Four Corners States, posing as the friendly couple you ask to snap your shot against scenic backdrops. Mesa Verde, Chaco Canyon, Bandelier. I handle the camera. Tay handles the wallets, plucking quick bucks, a credit card or two. Driver's licenses.

He pulls into the Lotaburger on Rio Grande Blvd., leaves the AC running while he goes in and orders. When he returns, Tay plunks the food into my lap.

As we turn onto Connie's street, Tay guns the Mustang and drives all the way up into the front yard. Chickens scatter. Connie cries, "The cat!" Tay doesn't step on the brakes until he's nearly on top of it. He revs the engine real loud and lays on the horn before he turns the engine off. If the cat could run, I'm sure it would. But it's only got three legs. Connie hops out of the car, scoops the cat into her arms and runs to the house. She doesn't look back.

"That was just plain mean."

Tay laughs and grabs his duffle from the back seat. "That little girl needs to know who's boss."

I shoulder my backpack, gather the bags of food, and follow him. Usually we stay in motels. I don't like the idea of staying with other

people. Especially a family. I stop in the doorway at the side of the house and watch dark clouds roll down off the Sandia Mountains. The air smells like rain for just a moment before a whip crack of thunder splits the sky and the warm wind gives Connie's tire swing a push. "Coming?" Tay asks. He holds the screen door open for me.

We enter the kitchen where Connie is sitting at a chrome dinette spotted with greasy globs, the cat tucked under her arm. I find a sponge in the sink and start to wipe down the table, but Tay says, "Don't." I drop the sponge and take a seat in one of the chairs. The yellow plastic cushions are split and sharp plastic tongues lick at the back of my thighs as I perch on the edge in a short denim skirt. I can handle eating with Connie, grubby as she is. But the filthy table and crippled, runny-eyed cat are too much, so I lie. "I'm allergic. Can you put the cat down?"

Connie takes her burger in one hand and grips the cat with the other. She sits on the floor not far from the overflowing litter box and starts to eat, tearing off little pieces of meat to feed the cat and then herself.

I stifle my gag reflex and eat as fast as I can. Then I take my milkshake and wander out of the kitchen into the living room to watch the storm. A sharp blade of lightening cuts through the sky. I'd give my right arm for a shot of tequila. I haven't had a drink in years. Tayber's the one who made me quit. He says it's important to be sharp at all times, and he thinks I'm considerably less than sharp even when I'm sober.

When I go back into the kitchen, a skinny woman in cut off jeans and a sleeveless cowboy shirt splashed with faded pink roses is leaning against the grimy door of her old Frigidaire. It's hard to imagine her track-covered arms hugging Connie or any words of kindness passing between her chapped and bleeding lips. She grabs Connie's shake, pops off the plastic cap and tosses down what's left. Connie

pouts and scratches behind the cat's chewed-up ears.

"Opal," Tay says by way of introduction. "Lydia."

"Nice to meet you." Opal nods and blows cigarette smoke in my direction. "Ly di a." She swings her hips from side to side as she breaks my name into sharp syllables. "Con," she says, "show her the attic. And put that goddamned cat down." Connie lets go and the cat flops into a heap that Opal shovels out the open back door with one foot.

"It's raining," Connie protests.

"Good," says Opal, slamming the door shut. The cat goes no farther than the back steps where it is protected by an aluminum awning. Pea-sized hail pings against it. The air smells like mud.

I grab my backpack and start to lift Tay's duffle from the floor, but he plants a shiny Lucchese on it. "Business. See you later."

Connie motions for me to follow her up the narrow kitchen staircase to the third story where it's hot and steamy. She opens the door to a small room with a mattress on the floor. One blanket, one sheet and a pillow are sitting in the middle of a folding chair. I go over to unlock the window sash. I've got to have some air.

"She likes them shut," says Connie.

I grunt and try to force the window open, but nails protruding from the frame keep it from rising more than a couple of inches. There is no window screen. I collapse onto the mattress and tell Connie to go. I am on the verge of tears, and don't want her to tell Tay or Opal that I'm crying.

For the next few days Opal and Tayber spend a lot of time in the

tricked out little Pinto that turned up the same morning that the Mustang he stole in Durango disappeared. He never keeps a car for more than a couple of months, and no way is he driving Opal's stinking diesel Lariat. They leave that two-toned piece of shit for Connie and me. The two of us sleep late and usually meet over a bowl of cereal in the dirty kitchen. Then we go out for the day.

Albuquerque is a dump, but it does have a lot of little parks scattered throughout the city. The ones near Connie's house are littered with condoms, syringes, and beer cans. So we drive up into the Sandia foothills near Juan Tabo Canyon or across the Rio Grande into the subdivisions along the West Mesa where the parks are full of green grass and sometimes shade trees.

The first time Connie spots a birthday party, wanders over to the table and starts singing Happy Birthday, I panic, sure she'll get kicked out and come running to me. But I'm surprised to see that she is served cake and ice cream along with the other kids. There are so many children that no one seems to notice the uninvited guest. Or perhaps they are just generous and willing to share the bounty with a ragamuffin party crasher. When the festivities end, Connie walks away with a Barbie treat bag.

I see the potential for profit and take Connie shopping for the kind of clothes the little girls at the party wear. Bright pedal pushers replace her scruffy blue jeans. She wears colorful polka-dotted and striped t-shirts instead of stained, faded ones. I brush her long tangled hair into a neat ponytail held in place by pastel scrunchies. I buy myself a pair of denim Capris, a large straw tote bag and soft cotton blouse embroidered with Mexican folk art designs. Connie paints my toenails copper with the polish she picked out. I slip my feet into a pair of bejeweled sandals and put my long blonde hair into a loose French braid. Armed with a cheap gift wrapped in shiny foil paper, Connie and I scout for parties to crash.

Before I start honing my pickpocket skills, I have to get comfortable chatting with the mothers in the park. Occasionally someone questions our presence. Connie and I work out a routine. She frantically tells me we are at the wrong party. I reprimand her, apologize to the party mom, and we make our exit, pretending to fret over our mistake. But usually people are so distracted, organizing games, preparing food, and keeping a watchful eye out for the dangerous stranger that we blend right in. Once I'm as confident as Connie, I help myself to loose cash and the occasional credit card from bags left unattended.

One day as we drive away from the park on the West Mesa, I notice a balloon bouquet tied to a mailbox. A colorful handwritten sign announces Happy Birthday BreeAnn. I cruise down the street and check the house out in Opal's battered Lariat, an eyesore in the land of shiny minivans and SUVs.

From the Wrent-a-Wreck not far from Opal's, I choose a 1994 Dodge Colt, which is not a wreck, it's just a couple of years old. Tayber wouldn't be caught dead in it, but he's not invited. And I'm not wasting money on an expensive minivan. Connie and I might not exactly fit in, but we won't stand out, either.

With Connie as my ticket into an expensive home, I school her in manners: please and thank you; no boisterous play indoors; sit quietly while the cake and ice cream is served; eat with utensils—not hands. Ask permission—for everything.

Our first time out, we are tripped up by questions about what day camp she attends. I claim migraine, and we quickly excuse ourselves. The next time we are prepared with a story. I have recently quit my job to spend more time with Connie. She's home with me for the summer. One mom who can't quite reconcile Connie's brown skin and black hair with my green-eyed blonde complexion asks indiscreetly, "Peruvian adoption?" to which I simply

nod instead of asking, "Fertility treatments?" about the squalling brood in her triple-wide stroller.

Outdoor parties are easier than indoor. Kids in the pool or on the trampoline, adults supervising. House empty. I can excuse myself early and go inside to the restroom. Scout things out. Hit a jewelry box. Loose cash on a bureau. I should tell Tayber about this scam, but doing things without him feels good.

I know that Connie is aware of what I'm doing. A couple of times I have turned around to find her standing quietly in a hallway, or walking up behind me in a closet. But she knows it is in her best interest to keep quiet about it. I use the money from the party take to buy her clothes and treat her to the occasional movies.

But one afternoon when I am rummaging through a jewelry box, skimming past the turquoise rings and bracelets, looking for less common pieces that will be easier to pawn, I hear a woman talking sharply to a child. And I know it has to be Connie.

"What are you doing in here?" The woman demands. Connie doesn't answer, and I can just see the innocent smile on her face. "What is your name?" The woman asks. "Who is your Mom?"

"Lydia," I hear Connie answer. I take a deep breath, go into the bathroom of the master bedroom and flush the toilet. I put a bright smile on my face, and walk out into the den.

"Connie," I say with syrupy surprise. "What are you doing, honey?"

"I was just looking for the bathroom," she says. "But Mandy's Mom got mad at me."

Mandy's Mom is, indeed, mad, but now she's also a little confused when I appear so suddenly from the bathroom in her bedroom.



"I'm so sorry," I pretend to be flustered. "I just got my period, and someone was in the other bathroom. I just couldn't wait. You know how it is when you get that flood, just bleed all over everything." I turn to Connie. "Why did you come in? Are you feeling okay? Did you get another tummyache?"

Connie frowns and rubs her belly. "I want to go home."

"She's had this problem with diarrhea lately." I put my hands on Connie's shoulders. "Do you need to go now, or do you just want to go home?"

"Home," says Connie.

"Do you mind if we just go out the front door?" My bag is full of cash from the other Mom's purses, and I've got a pair of diamond earrings belonging to Mandy's Mom in my pocket. I need to get out of here. "And don't worry about the treat bag," I say as if that was the uppermost thing on Mandy's Mom's mind. "Seems like there's a party every day in the summer. She's had plenty of treats lately. Probably explains the diarrhea." The Mom frowns, disgusted, eager to be rid of us now. "What do you say to Mandy's Mom?"

"Thank you for inviting me," Connie says sweetly as we walk out the front door and down the street to where I've parked the Colt around the corner.

"What the fuck, Connie?" I shove her into the car and slam the door.

"What are you so mad about?" Connie asks. She's digging around in her My Little Pony backpack.

"You nearly got me busted. If Tay finds out," I start to explain. "Do not ever tell Tayber what I've been doing. Or Opal. Understand?"

Don't tell anyone." I figure I better cover all the bases.

"I'm not a tattletale." Connie is insulted. She pouts and crosses her arms in front of her chest.

As I drive away from the mesa and cross the Rio Grande along the I-40 Bridge, I read signs to Amarillo, Las Cruces, Santa Fe. I'm tempted to just keep driving. But I'm not going anywhere with Connie. I drive to Opal's so I can drop her off before I return the car. I need a little time to myself.

I park on the street to let Connie out. The Lariat and the Pinto are in the driveway. At some point, I'll have to explain why I rented a car, but I'll figure that out later. "Get out. I have to take the car back."

"Why can't I go with you? I always go with you." Connie picks her backpack up off the floor and shoves her hand into it.

"Get. Out." I try to keep my voice down.

"Don't you want to see what I got?"

"No. I don't. You shouldn't have gotten anything, and that is the very last party we are ever going to, so I hope you had a good fucking time."

Connie glares at me and pulls a revolver out of the My Little Pony backpack. "I was going to give this to you."

"Jesus. Shit." I reach for the gun Connie is pointing at me.

She pulls her arm back. "I'm keeping it now."

I realize what Connie was doing in the den, and I fear that someone who leaves a handgun where a child might find it is probably also

careless enough to keep it loaded. "Shit. I guess it's a good thing Mandy's Mom didn't use that on us." Connie usually likes my sense of humor. But she's not laughing. I turn off the engine and take the keys out of the ignition. "If you give me that, I'll take you to the movies."

"I want to rob a bank. We need a gun."

"Jesus, Connie. I, we, don't rob banks, you know. Just houses. We don't hurt people. We don't need that gun." I open my hand, palm up in the non-threatening way you reach out to an unfamiliar dog.

Connie turns the revolver over in her hand. "Taur us." She sounds the name out then points it at me. "It's mine."

"It's not legal." I continue down my foolish path. "For a little girl to have a gun."

Connie ignores me. With one hand, she unlocks the door while holding the gun in the other. She gets out, dragging the bright pink backpack behind her as she walks around to the side entrance and into the kitchen.

While I'm trying to decide whether to stay or go, I hear the shot and leap out of the car. When I get to the kitchen, Tayber is standing next to Connie. The gun is on the table along with Opal's works. She's clearly just finished slamming some of the shit she and Tayber bought. Her head and arms are on the table, and she's bleeding hard from just above her right breast. A river of red runs from the table to the filthy floor. "Did you?" I ask Tayber. I don't want to believe that Connie fired that shot. Tayber answers by shoving his long fingers into my carefully coiffed French braid and yanking my head back.

"Stand over there." He points to the refrigerator and Connie does.

Tay bangs my head firmly but just once again the kitchen wall.

“Where did you get the gun?”

“We rob houses,” Connie says.

“We don't . . .” I start, but Tay gives my head another knock on the wall.

“Answer me.”

“We steal things at birthday parties,” Connie offers cheerfully.

“Shut up,” Tay says, but I can tell by the way he's looking at her that he is seeing her in a new light. He pulls harder on my hair. “You've got a scam,” he says to me. “You've branched out on your own. And with a kid.”

He shoves me twice against the wall. I can hardly breathe. “This is a mess, isn't it?”

Connie looks at Opal. “Blood cleans up.”

“Hear that, Rox.” Tayber punches me hard in the stomach. I fall to the floor. “A couple of sponges and we're good to go.”

If he gets wound up and goes into one of his rant trances, I might make it out the front door. But when Tay points his Lucchese at me and gives me a swift kidney kick, I know won't be going anywhere.

Connie watches.

“What are we going to do now?” Tayber shouts.

“We could go to California,” Connie says.

Through the mist that is clouding my vision, I watch Tayber begin to understand.

"She's just a little girl." I choke on the words.

"You were just a little girl once." Tayber sneers at me.

"I was 16!" Saying it out loud makes me remember. I was a sixteen-year-old runaway when I met Tay at the shelter in Tulsa. He was 30 and handsome and so wise. I thought. Everyone's favorite counselor. But I was his favorite girl.

"Maybe eight is the new 16." Tayber laughs. "Come here." He motions Connie to his side. They both turn to face me as he puts an arm around her shoulder. "Smile," he tells her, "like someone's taking our picture."

Connie pulls her long ponytail over her shoulder before she flashes her big smile.

"She could be my daughter, don't you think?" Tayber asks. He's already moved on to his new life as Connie's father.

"Connie," I sputter her name through the blood that is filling my mouth. "Don't go."

Tayber laughs. "Connie, if you stay here, do you know what the future holds for you?"

Connie shakes her head. "What?"

"Well, it looks like you killed Opal. So that means you go to jail. And even if she's not dead," he stops talking for a minute and gives Opal a poke in the back, "at the very least you are headed for some kind of nut house. Or maybe foster care. Nobody's going to leave you

with a junkie.”

“Stay with me,” I cry.

“And I will good and goddamned guarantee you that no one on the planet is going to leave you in the care of this bitch who used you to commit robbery and steal a gun.”

“Connie.” Her name is all I can manage.

“Get your gun,” Tayber says to the little girl. He always knows how to seal the deal.

Connie walks over to the kitchen table and picks up the revolver. Before they leave, she bends down and takes the keys to the Colt from my hand. The last time I see Connie, she's skipping past the tire swing.

