

THE TRUTH

ABOUT

Las Mariposas

OFELIA DUMAS LACHTMAN

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Lachtman, Ofelia Dumas

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Summary: When sixteen-year-old Caro Torres goes to help her Tía Matilde at her bed-and-breakfast in Two Sands, California, she ends up also helping her aunt fend off the attempts of her ex-husband to buy the property and steal the treasures that are hidden there.

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For Martha with love and thanks

Chapter 1

 The bus jolted to a stop and Caro Torres shot up in her seat, fully awake. She had been dozing for the last half hour. The Pacific Ocean was beautiful, especially on a clear August day like this, but she had been staring at it for several hours and, for her, enough had been enough to put her to sleep.

“What’s this?” she called to the bus driver over the rows of empty seats. “A rest stop?”

They were parked alongside a line of small wooden buildings that looked like shops, including one with an open doorway that was flanked by two large pots of red geraniums. The fading sign above the door said, “Bradley’s Hardware,” and beside it a smaller, but freshly painted sign announced that this was also the United States Post Office.

“This is it, young lady,” the bus driver replied, standing up and stretching. “Two Sands. I turn inland now. I’ll put your bag on the sidewalk.” He swung to the ground through the open bus door.

Once the bus was gone, Caro stood on the sidewalk by the post office, her backpack and her friend Ernie’s old duffel bag at her feet. A cool ocean breeze played across her face. It smelled salty and clean and she breathed deeply. A tingle of excitement filled her. She had made it. She was here. But the feeling of exhilaration didn’t last long. She stared across the three-lane highway. A few



more weathered buildings lined the shoulder of the road and behind them a gentle slope led to the sand. To her right, a few blocks away, a long and narrow wooden pier pushed out into the ocean. The pier was empty. The shops, too, showed no sign of life. Caro bit her lip and scanned the buildings again. She noticed that some had “Closed” signs on their doors or windows. She frowned as she thought, I’m a city girl. Crowds of people I can take, but no people at all gives me the creeps.

Back in Los Angeles she had pictured Two Sands as a tiny town, yes, but one with a white church steeple and cottages with flower-bordered picket fences, all clustered near a cove that had a wharf and berths that held bright little sailboats. There was nothing bright about the long wooden pier across the way. She shrugged philosophically. After all, she couldn’t very well complain, she had asked to come here. Actually, she had fought to come here.

“I can do it, Mamá,” she had said after they had read her aunt’s letter. “I’m good with a vacuum cleaner and I have an absolutely good drivers’ license. And you, yourself, said I was a good driver. I know Tía Matilde asked for Louisa, but I’m sixteen and a half. Louisa’s not that much older and, anyway, she won’t go.” Caro knew that her sister Louisa had a special reason for not wanting to go. It’s name was Ramón. Caro also had a special reason. Hers was seven years old. It had four cylinders and a manual shift and it was called a Honda. Sure, she’d have to give up the rest of the summer, but nothing much was happening in the barrio, anyway. Actually, it was getting pretty boring what with Alicia still gone in Mexico and Papá keeping such a vigilant eye on her—as if she was going to hold up a convenience store or join a gang or something. So, in the six weeks left of summer, by staying



with her Tía Matilde and doing “ordinary household chores” while her aunt’s usual live-in helper was gone, she would earn enough to buy Ernie’s old car. Oh, and then wouldn’t it be great to show the girls from Green Street her wheels, her very own wheels. She *had* to persuade her mother.

“I can do it,” she repeated. “Really, Mamá.”

“It will take a lot of patience, Carolina,” her mother said, her forehead furrowed into a frown. “And that’s something you have very little of. My sister Matilde is sweet but she’s moody and a bit helpless. What I should do is go myself.”

“Oh, no, Mamá,” Caro cried, her feelings plummeting. There goes my Honda, she thought. I can’t let this happen. “Papá needs you.”

“So he says,” her mother replied. “No, I’m not going. I’m not sure that you should either.”

“But, Mamá,” Caro said, using the argument she had worked out overnight, “maybe if I get away from all the bad influences you and Papá say are here, maybe that would be a good thing for me.” Mamá gave her a skeptical look and a little smile came and went on her face. There had been more talk after that, but Caro had known that it was all over; she had won.

And now, after a bus trip to Santa Barbara and a local bus to Two Sands, here she was a week later in what looked like a deserted movie set. She swung around. Well, not completely deserted.

From somewhere behind her a telephone had rung and was answered. Of course, Caro thought, her tight shoulders loosening, the post office has to be open. For sure they will know where Tía Matilde lives. She picked up her

backpack and dragged the duffel bag close to the open doorway.

"Hello," she called into the gloomy interior of a room that was packed tightly with hardware. Gardening tools, ladders, and painting materials were pushed up against the walls and in between there were narrow aisles stocked with smaller items. "Hello," she called again and walked cautiously through the aisles toward a light that shone in a corner against the back wall. "Is anybody there?"

"Back here," a voice called. "I'm just about to close up."

"I'm sure glad you're still here," she said, addressing a small bald man who stood behind an L-shaped counter in the corner. His glasses, perched on top of his shiny dome, glistened in the single light above him. Caro had trouble drawing her eyes away from them. "I just got here," she said, "and I have to find out how to get to . . ." She dug in her pocket for her aunt's address: "700 Loma Vista."

The man had been pulling things off the counter as she spoke, but when she said the address, he stopped and looked at her with new interest. "So you're going up to Matilde's," he said. "You're not going to try to sell her anything, are you?"

"No. I'm . . . I'm . . . well, no."

"That's good. So what do you want her for?"

What Caro wanted to say was, hey, old man, it's none of your business, but she bit her lip and, instead, said, "She's my aunt. I came to see her. Can you tell me how to get there?"

"Well, sure. Do you need stamps or anything?" When she said no, he locked a drawer below the counter and pushed closed the heavy door of a small floor safe, pushing tight a combination lock and twirling it. "All right," he



said, "but we'll have to hurry. Wait for me by the front door." He waved her in that general direction.

As soon as she stepped outside, she heard him lock the door behind her and in a moment he appeared around the corner of the small building, struggling into a dark suit coat. "Come on, come on," he said without pausing, "leave your bag there and follow me. Andy will pick it up."

"Hey! Hey!" she called after him. "Where are we going? I just asked you where my aunt lives. And who's Andy?"

"We're going up to Greg's Market. Andy delivers for him and drives people around too. He'll take you to Matilde's. When he gets back from the funeral."

"How will he know I need a ride?"

"Ever heard of a cell phone?"

"Sure," she said. "It's just that for the last few minutes I forgot we were in the twenty-first century. Sorry." His face held a hint of a grin as he threw her a quick look, but he said nothing.

They remained silent then, trudging toward the long wooden pier. In two dusty blocks they were at a level with the entrance to the pier. They turned inland on what a street sign said was Pier Road. Here, too, the street was lined on either side with small wooden stores, but, unlike those on the highway, these shops were not gift or souvenir shops or short-order seafood restaurants. They were the stores found in every neighborhood: a dry cleaner, a barber shop, a beauty salon, a clothing store, and, at the top of the incline, a market. Only the market was open. Open or closed, they all had black mourning ribbons hanging from their doors.



Caro started to ask who had died and then thought better of it. It didn't take a rocket scientist, she told herself, to figure out that it was someone important to Two Sands. Besides, she'd better save her breath if she was going to keep up with the little man from the post office who was striding uphill more easily than she.

Pier Road slanted upward toward Greg's Market, where the shops ended. The road, however, continued curving up one of the low hills that were strung out behind Two Sands. She was extremely glad when the man from the post office pushed open the door to the grocery and they stepped inside. Greg's Market was large and bright. Its shelves and aisles were crowded with groceries, and, except for a girl standing near the checkout counter, it was empty of people.

The girl wore white shorts and a lime-colored tank top on a tanned and perfectly curved body. Her face was heart-shaped, with large blue eyes and a soft full mouth, and was surrounded by a capful of shiny red curls. Looking at her, Caro was uncomfortably aware of her own slim, boyish figure, of her mousy brown hair pulled back into a ponytail and of the crumpled jeans and not-so-clean running shoes she was wearing.

"Well, hi there, Uncle Sam," the girl said in a drawn-out drawl. "What're you doing here?"

"Looking for Andy. Where is he?"

"Gone to the funeral, I suppose." She shrugged prettily. "Why aren't you there?"

"Had to stay open. But I'm heading for the cemetery. This girl needs a lift to Matilde's. Call Andy, will you?"

"When I finish here." The girl shuffled some papers on the counter beside her. "What's she going to Mattie's for?"

Caro spoke up. "Look, Mr. . . . Mr. . . ."



"Samuels."

"Look, Mr. Samuels, if you'll just tell me how to get there, I'll find my way."

"No. You just hang in here till Andy gets back. This is his home base and he'll be—hey, there he is now." He hurried down an aisle to the back of the store and, in a moment, there was the sound of a door slamming. Caro heard him call something and, almost immediately, he was back inside.

He was followed at a slower, more deliberate pace by a dark-haired young man in walking shorts and a white T-shirt. He was not exactly good looking. His nose was a bit long and a bit crooked, but there was something about his eyes and his wide mouth that made his face appealing. "Stop a moment, Sam," he called.

"Can't. Fred's picking me up at the pier and I'm late already." Mr. Samuels was at the front entrance as he finished. He turned only to say, "He's there already," and disappeared.

The girl at the checkout counter smiled at the young man and said, "Thought you were at the funeral. You didn't go dressed like that, did you?"

"I never thought to go." He turned to Caro. "Are you waiting for me?"

"If you're Andy, I'm waiting for you. Mr. Samuels said you'd give me a ride."

"Sure. How far are you going?"

"She's going to Mattie's," the redhead said. "Who knows why."

"Well, that's not too far," Andy said. "Let's go." He walked over and picked up Caro's backpack. The girl at the counter frowned as she watched him. She opened her mouth with a little intake of breath as if to say something



and then didn't. At the entrance to the store, Andy turned and said, "See you, Deb," and the girl shrugged.

Caro followed Andy around the side of the building and up into a faded blue S.U.V. that had seen a lot of use. Even so, the interior was clean and well kept. She dug in her jeans pocket for the crumpled paper with her aunt's address and said, "She lives on Loma Vista."

"I know."

"Does everybody know everybody in Two Sands?"

"No, not everybody," he said with a little grin. He swung the car on to Pier Road, turning left toward the hills.

"Oh!" she cried. "My other bag. It's by the post office. Could we pick it up, please?"

"Sure." Andy made a quick U-turn toward the highway where they came to a stop facing the wooden pier. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "We'll have a little wait," he said as a line of cars on the highway inched past them. The line was headed by a hearse.

"Oh, oh," she said, "the funeral procession. Who died?"

He stared straight ahead for an instant and then cleared his throat. "My friend, Bradley Poole. He's . . . he's the mayor's son."