

SHARON VANDER MEER

Finding Family



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Sharon Vander Meer

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Dedication

I am blessed with the best husband. Robert Vander Meer's unflagging encouragement inspired me to follow my dream. His patience allowed me the time necessary to get my words on the page.



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Bob Vander Meer, Sally Hanson and Gail Malley kindly provided editing services for this book. For that I am grateful.
This story is better for their insight and recommendations.

I

COMPANY'S COMING

AT SIXTY-FIVE LILLY Irish found it hard to get excited about much of anything, until now, and maybe excited was the wrong word. Petrified? Miffed? Worried? A combination of all three?

“What is that girl thinking, bringing herself and her dad-blamed kids to stay with me,” she muttered before turning her attention once more to her journal.

She must think I have oodles of money and that she can mooch off me and I won't say anything. Well, she's got another think coming!

Lilly swiped at her slightly pointed nose with the back of her hand and sniffed. She didn't even know her niece to speak of. Hadn't heard from her in years, didn't know her kids. What was she going to do with them?

Lilly wasn't looking forward to taking in young ones, figuring the children would be snotty like so many nowadays. And how could she be any help? Her part time job at Basket's Market and Social Security barely met her needs. How was she supposed to take in four people? She still had a mortgage on the house because of Harve's children's college expenses. Insurance from his passing took care of most of it, but not all by any means.

“What am I going to do?”

Her empty house had no answer.

Well, it is what it is, as Harve used to say. In truth she couldn't turn away her sister's child, and her children, God knows. Milly would find a way to make her life miserable if she did, never mind she'd been dead for nearly twenty years.

Lilly sniffed again, blinked back the sudden sting in her eyes and coughed away the catch in her throat; funny how it could hit her right in the heart sometimes.

Milly and Lilly. What were Mom and Dad thinking? Not the first time she'd wondered about that. They weren't twins, for goodness sake. Her folks had wanted Lilly to be a mini Milly, like that was going to happen.

She could still picture her sister, beautiful in the way some girls are, wholesome looking yet sexy. Lilly hadn't envied Milly the attention she got, or that she was the most popular girl in school. She didn't even resent knowing their parents favored her sister. The two had grown up as close as any two sisters could be, until Milly took off with the Hadley boy. Her mother nearly died of shock and her father never did get over it. Even after Milly ran off, all her mom and dad talked about was how much they missed her and how she'd wasted her potential and wasn't it a shame she lived so far away? Lilly got sick of it fast, especially when they would stay home all the time in case they might, just *might*, get a call from their beloved Milly. By her senior year in high school Lilly had given up on her folks showing up at her events and activities.

Mom and Dad were both at peace with the Lord now, and didn't have to fret about Milly. If they'd lived to know she'd died in an accident that involved a drunk-as-a-skunk Trey Hadley driving into a tree, grief would have killed them anyway.

Milly had been in misery from the get-go in her ill-advised marriage, but she was pure stubborn through and through and wouldn't admit she'd made a mistake. Staying with the son of buck after their first baby died at birth wasn't the best idea, but that was Milly for you.

Saddest of all Trey had survived the accident that killed her sister only to drink his sorry self to death over the next four years. Annie, their only child, had disappeared not long after his funeral.

Lilly sighed. It had happened so long ago, longer than she wanted to think about. They were all gone, Mom, Dad, Milly, Harve.

Now Annie and her children were on their way. She had agreed to let them move in temporarily.

"Until I get on my feet," Annie had said, her voice on the phone sounding hauntingly like that of her long dead mother.

Lilly hadn't seen much of the girl, mostly at funerals. First Mom's following a short but painful bout with cancer, and then Dad's six months later. A heart attack, the doctor said. More like a broken heart in her opinion. Within a year

Milly was gone and then Trey. Annie's face didn't even register as a memory other than a sullen mouth, which was to be expected. After all her mother had died because of her father's stupidity and then he'd drunk himself to death. What must that be to live with?

At each of the funerals the child had been unapproachable. At Milly's service she still showed marks from injuries she had sustained in the accident, most of them superficial. She had been wearing her seatbelt and her mother had not. Annie had hardly spoken, standing sullenly next to her father who seemed unaware of where he was, much less able to grasp what was happening. Somehow he'd managed to stay out of jail, although Lilly thought he should have been prosecuted for vehicular homicide. That's what she'd told Harve. Her sweet husband merely shook his head and asked, "And what would happen to Annie?"

As it turned out Trey must not have cared about Annie because four years later they attended his funeral, his death a combination of alcohol and drug abuse. Annie – older, bitter and more surly – only said one thing to her and Harve. "I'm not going to live with you!"

That was a bit of a shock. Lilly hadn't considered taking her in. Harve would have, but not Lilly. Harve's children were in their adolescent years. It was challenge enough to remain sane with Elizabeth smarting off one minute and sobbing wretchedly the next, and an amiable if sometimes difficult Michael staying out with his friends 'til all hours doing who knew what. Not serious enough to land in jail mind you, but pushing the limits all the time. Taking on Milly's child would have been more than they – or at least Lilly – could have handled.

Trey Hadley's folks had taken Annie in, but she hadn't remained with them long, maybe a month, and then she'd disappeared. Lilly hadn't heard a thing about her in the intervening years; now here she was on her way, with three youngsters in tow.

Best not to think too hard on this. We'll see how it goes. They won't be here long.

She laid the pen aside, closed the cover of her journal and stood.

Lilly was a prim, small woman with perhaps a little too much weight around the belly. She disguised it with clothing that didn't cling, thinking it made her look thinner. All it did was make her look shorter and wider. Her hair, worn in a tidy bun, was dyed an unflattering dark shade of brown that did nothing to enhance her looks. Her gold wire-rimmed glasses hid her most remarkable feature, dark green eyes framed by long dark lashes.

She started to walk away and leave her journal on the service island where she always left it. She could no longer do that, not with a bunch of strangers in the house. She was brutally honest about what she wrote. She might prance delicately around everything in her dealings with people from day to day, but

she didn't write anything she didn't feel or believe to be true. Someday, when she was dead, somebody would read her journals and know she hadn't been a nice person at all, not that it would matter; she'd be gone. It gave her perverse satisfaction that Elizabeth or Michael would one day find out how much they'd hurt her by their indifference. Harve, bless him, had always chalked their actions up to growing pains and found ways to overlook behavior that left her livid. Of course, they were his children, not hers, as Elizabeth and Michael were disposed to remind her in moments of high dudgeon.

Lilly shook her head. No use thinking about that. She picked up the journal and carried it down the hall to her bedroom, tucking it into a drawer in the bedside table, laying it on top of a book already there.

She realized with some frustration that with the arrival of strangers she had lost her privacy. A kernel of resentment lodged in her chest. Why did she say yes to this nonsense? She sighed and headed for the kitchen. Annie had said they would arrive around suppertime, but not to go to any trouble. They'd be too tired from the trip to eat.

Was that any way to take care of children? Of course they would be hungry. The oldest boy – what was his name? Carl, Cecil, Charles? In a sudden panic of unknown origin she hurried to where the phone hung on the kitchen wall and looked at the note she'd written after Annie's call.

Caleb Walter (called Caleb), 12

Alexander Marc (Alex), 4

Millicent Marie (Marie), 7.

She drew in a shaky breath. Why was this making her so crazy? They are family, she thought, never mind she didn't know them from Adam's off ox, for heaven's sake.

She opened the oven and checked the meatloaf. It smelled delicious. She wasn't about to have people in her house and not feed them. How that would work out over time was another matter. Supper tonight was just the beginning. Annie hadn't said how long they would be with her. Lilly so rarely prepared a full meal she was glad to do it for tonight, but did not intend to become chief cook and bottle washer to a bunch of strangers.

"Annie best not make any mistake about that!" she said to the pot of potatoes boiling on the stove. She used a fork to test the potatoes for doneness and slid the pan off the burner.

"Perfect."

Lilly had fallen into the habit of talking out loud, perhaps to hear the sound of a human voice, even if it was her own.

With the practiced efficiency of a woman who prided herself on her cooking she quickly drained the water off into another pot, reserving it for gravy she would prepare right before time to eat. She placed the potatoes in a

mixing bowl and set it aside, then poured skim milk – so much healthier and not half bad once you got used to it – and butter – you couldn’t completely sacrifice taste, for heaven’s sake! – in the pan and let it heat. When it began to simmer she added salt and pepper, a little celery seasoning, some Mrs. Dash Table Blend because she liked the sprinkles of color it gave as well as the flavor, and stirred it all together. When she was satisfied it met her exacting standards, she poured the mixture over the potatoes slowly as she turned on the mixer. In minutes she had a bowl of fluffy mashed potatoes that gave off a slightly spicy aroma. She put the food into a casserole dish, topped it with tinfoil and placed it in the oven to stay warm.

Her eyes went to the clock. Five-thirty. If Annie remained true to her word they’d be pulling in soon, probably in the next half hour or so.

Lilly was giddy, by turns excited and scared witless. She didn’t know these people. What was she to say? How was she to treat them? Should she hug them when they came in? Lilly had never been one to do those kinds of things with any but her husband, and when they would allow it, his children. It made her quite uncomfortable for people to embrace her when they came to visit or when she called on them, something that happened rarely. After Harve died folks had shown up often to check on her and ask how she was doing. Truth was, that made her uncomfortable as well.

“Is everything okay?” a deacon from the church would ask.

Lilly was tempted to say, “My husband and best friend is dead. What do you think?” Of course, she never did. Nice people didn’t say things like that. Nice people said, “I’m getting better, thanks for asking.”

After Harve died, for at least a year she was numb; it was the only way she could get through life. Everyone had thought Elizabeth or Michael would stay around and see after her when the funeral was over, but they had their own lives to live. That was the rationale she used. In reality they couldn’t wait to get away from the pain of knowing their beloved father no longer walked through the halls of their childhood home, his booming laughter filling every corner. She understood. It had nearly killed her, truth be told.

Lilly gave a sharp shake of her head. No need going back. She had enough on her plate. She glanced at the clock again. Barely five minutes had passed.

She twitched her nose, a subtle movement that had etched lines on either side of her nose, the only wrinkles on her otherwise smooth skin. If Harve had been alive he’d have said, “Now Lil, don’t get your het up.” If either Elizabeth or Michael had been around they’d have said . . . no, not said anything, they’d have rolled their eyes. A nose twitch from Lilly Irish was a sign of disapproval that everyone ignored.

With nothing else to keep her occupied she bustled over to the hutch and took out her everyday dishes and flatware. Ordinarily company would warrant

taking out the good stuff, but this was a family with little ones. Her good stuff wasn't all that good, compared to rich folks like Mrs. Candy from church, but it all matched and didn't have chip one. Not that her everyday dishes were beat up; they were serviceable, with maybe a chip here and there.

She set the dining table and stood back to judge the result, tilting her head from side to side as though that would somehow change her perspective. She took a small silk flower arrangement from a cupboard under the service island that separated the kitchen from the large family room, and placed it in the center of the table. With her neat hands folded at her waist she nodded approval. The clock read 6:20.

"Maybe suppertime to Annie doesn't mean the same as it does to me," she said to a paper napkin as she aligned it with a plate.

She checked to be sure the oven heat was on warm and moved the simmering pot liquor off the burner so it didn't boil away. Her nose twitched. She turned her attention to straightening cupboards to occupy her thoughts. No sense in wasting time that could be better spent doing something.

By eight o'clock Lilly had put the food away and scoured the kitchen. It was probably cleaner than in years, which was saying something since she was a stickler about keeping a clean and tidy house. She'd taken out her worry over Annie and the children not showing up by getting everything spit spot, followed by an all out attack on a stubborn stain on the hall carpet. Nearly a month ago a dishwasher repairman had tracked something in and Lilly had spent an entire afternoon trying to get it out. Tonight she'd succeeded, but the rest of the carpet around it looked filthy by comparison. Sometimes you just couldn't win.

She went into the living room. Tidy and rarely used, it didn't need a thing done to it. She fluffed the pillows on the sofa and scanned for anything out of place. When she got to the accumulation of photos arranged on the mantel above the gas fireplace, she paused. Her favorite among the lot was of Harve and the kids. She had taken it while they were on their first vacation together as a family. It was an ocean-side scene with lots of waves and a sandy beach. The two children stood behind Harve who was seated on a blanket trying to read. Michael flexed the muscles on his skinny arms and Elizabeth grinned mischievously from under a floppy sun hat that framed features already showing evidence of the beauty she would become.

Lilly swallowed the lump in her throat. She had stopped thinking about the "if only" years ago. "If only I was their real mother they would love me as much as I love them." At times like this she couldn't help but long for something she would never have.

By nine-thirty Lilly's worry had turned to anger. The gall of that girl! At the least she should have called. "Thoughtless, that's the word for it, thoughtless," she said to her bedspread as she folded it back.

She dressed for bed, and after looking out the front window one more time to see if a car had arrived, she returned to her room and got under the covers. Her mind was in a muddle and her heart ached. Hard as it was to admit, she realized she had been looking forward to having people around. Oh, not for a long time or anything, but she did get lonely.

Lilly wrote in her journal to ease her mind, and then tried to read.

Early September winds whipped through the trees in the yard hurling cascades of leaves against the windows. She'd never much liked wind. It always blew in messes that had to be cleaned up.

It was past ten o'clock and she was sound asleep when the doorbell rang followed by a persistent knocking. She jerked awake and the book she'd been reading fell to the floor. She blinked owlishly trying to clear the fuzziness from her brain.

A muffled, "Mrs. Irish? Aunt Lilly?" wafted through the house.

Realizing her guests had finally arrived Lilly nearly broke her toe in her haste to get to the door.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" She slipped into her robe, flipped on the hall light and hobbled to the door. When she opened it a blast of wind whistled through the screen and chilled her to the bone. Standing on the doorstep illuminated by the automatic sensor lights were four shivering individuals and a dog the size of Texas.

"Mrs. Irish? Uh, Aunt Lilly?"

Annie's hesitant uncertainty cut Lilly's anger to the quick. She unlocked the screen door and opened it.

"Get in here before the wind blows the house up and carries it away! Come on now, in, in, in you go."

They shambled inside, but when the dog tried to enter Lilly pointed a stern finger. "Not the mutt."

"Krank, stay," Annie said softly.

The dog looked back at the howling wind and then plaintively at its mistress.

"Mom, he's scared," a voice said from under a hooded sweatshirt.

"What did I say on the way here, little Miss Marie? You have to mind Aunt Lilly and do as she says. If she doesn't want Krank in the house then he has to stay out. We'll leave him in the car."

Weariness weighed down every word out of Annie's mouth.

"Well it ain't right! He's just scared."

“Isn’t right, and I know he’s scared,” Annie said dropping to her knees. She pushed the hood back and exposed the round face of a girl whose determined chin spoke volumes about her ability to stand her ground. A tangle of brown and gold curls framed her face. Blue, blue eyes sparked with anger at an injustice much in need of correcting. There could be no doubt who her grandmother had been.

“Get on in here,” Lilly said with an exasperated sigh. “That creature can go in the garage.”

Marie grinned and cocked an eyebrow as if to say, “See, ya gotta hang in there to get what you want.”

Lilly closed the door leaving her guests clustered in the entry like refugees. She somehow envisioned this moment as a time to introduce herself and welcome her guests. She was frantically searching for just the right words when she noticed the dog sniffing delicately at the spot she’d spent much elbow grease cleaning. He lifted his leg and let fly.

“Eeep!” Lilly said.

“Kra-ank,” Annie groaned.

“Cool!” a voice said from under the bill of a cap that hid most of the speaker’s face.

Marie giggled.

It was the slouching figure hanging back behind Annie who stepped forward. He firmly grasped the dog’s collar. “Garage?”

Lilly could do little more than point her finger down the hall and say, “Through the kitchen, door’s on your left.”

Annie hiccupped a sob. “Oh, Mrs. Irish, I’m . . . oh, God, I’m so, so sorry!”

Lilly drew in a deep breath, got a whiff of hot dog urine, and coughed it back out.

“Into the living room, the lot of you. Go on, Annie. I’ll get something to clean up this mess.”

“Got it,” said the youth who’d handled the dog. He came down the hall with a roll of paper towels in one hand and a bottle of Windex in the other.

“No, no, not that, boy! I have carpet cleaner.”

Lilly blinked when he leaned toward her aggressively and said in a soft but somehow menacing voice, “Name’s Caleb and if you don’t think I can do the job it’s all yours.” He placed the towels and cleaner on the floor between them and shuffled away.

“Caleb, you should get right back here this minute,” Annie said, the order weakened considerably by the “should” and the reedy way she said it.

Lilly was getting a headache. “Please, go on into the living room. I’ll take care of this.”

Annie looked from the wet spot to the door, and in the direction she'd last seen the back of her son, clearly unsure whether to cut and run, go after the boy or clean up the dog's contribution to the chaos.

Lilly pushed her gently, which seemed to be all the encouragement she needed. The other two children followed her.

Lilly hastened into the kitchen, retrieved gloves from the utility drawer and got the carpet spot cleaner from under the sink. Through the door to the garage she could hear the dog whining and scratching.

As she passed by the living room on her way back down the hall she saw the two smaller children huddled close to Annie while the older boy sprawled insolently on the sofa.

Lilly wasn't quite sure what she'd done wrong but having raised two children she knew figuring it out was beyond her. If the boy was in a snit because she didn't mousey mite up to him, well la di da! Her nose twitched and she sniffed self-righteously as she got down on her knees and tackled the dog pee.