Every morning Tillie rose with the sun—she didn’t own an alarm clock—never needed one. She had her breakfast and morning coffee in her small, neat kitchen, and then put on her barn boots and went out to do her chores. This had been her morning routine since she and Jack had moved down to the little house twenty-five years ago. Jack wasn’t here to share the routine any more; it had been over ten years since he had gone to the barn and hadn’t returned. He would have been ninety-five this month. Thinking of how excited he got about birthdays—worse than a kid—brought a smile to her face and then a tear to her eye as she remembered the love and the loss. She shook her head as though to clear away her thoughts and said to herself, “Enough of that, you have work to do.”

While she wandered her farm and fed her animals, Tillie talked softly to them and to herself. “I’ve been taking care of this farm for over seventy years; they can take me away from here when I’m dead and not a moment earlier,” Tillie said to the chickens as she tossed them handfuls of corn. She gave them fresh water and feed, and then collected the eggs. She always left a few to hatch,
trying to switch up which hens had eggs to hatch, because she liked to give them all a chance to mother. At last count, she had seventy-three chickens; most of them were of the common Orpington variety, but Tillie did like to choose a few more exotic varieties to spice up the barnyard. Every summer Tillie went to the local county fair to scope out the chickens being shown and was often able to buy a young Ancona or Sumatra to add to her collection. Tillie named every one of her chickens and could tell them apart. Each chicken had a distinct personality and look.

Jack had built her the chicken coop when they moved down from the big farm. It was a peace offering. She had resisted the move and the sale of the big farm house they had raised their family in. Jack knew how much she loved her chickens, and building the coop demonstrated to Tillie how much he loved her. It was a Cadillac of chicken coops. Jack had created a miniature version of their big red barn. There were fifty nesting boxes and a spacious fenced run. Tillie had more chickens than coop at the moment and she was housing the overflow in the unused hayloft in the barn. The chickens didn’t mind being in the barn, but finding the eggs in the hay was a challenge. This challenge was rapidly increasing the number in her flock. Tillie knew something needed to be done, but she
couldn’t bear the thought of giving her chickens to the farmer down the road, knowing he would butcher them when they stopped laying eggs. Tillie let her chickens live out their lives naturally, looking at the ones who had stopped laying as “retired.”

Walking around the barnyard, she stopped periodically, leaning hard on her cane and, catching her breath. She didn’t really need the cane, but her son insisted she carry it in the barnyard, and it came in handy for shooing errant chickens and leaning on while she rested. Next in line for breakfast and fresh water were the horse and the goat. “I might not move as fast now, but I can still take care of myself. I can take care of you too,” she said to the horse as she brushed her down. Dottie whinnied softly and shook her head, enjoying the attention. Tillie reached in to her pocket and brought out a carrot for her; “I brought a treat for you.” She bought the horse for her great-grandkids to ride—what a waste of money that was, since they never visited, let alone rode the horse—and Peanut, the nanny goat, was purchased to keep Dottie company.

Next were the outside dogs. They had been barking and running up and down in their kennels since she’d walked out the door. “Calm down, you wild beasts; you’ll get your breakfast.” Finally, she returned to the barn to feed the
cats. Most of the cats were too wild to get anywhere near, but there were a couple who were friendly. She accumulated most of the cats as strays and drop-offs because people in town knew she would take care of them, and unlike the pound, she didn’t charge a fee to do it.

Once everyone had a stomach full of breakfast, she moved down to the garden to pick peas for her lunch. Tillie took the bucket of peas and a bowl and sat on the swing on her back porch, shucking them. She loved the motion of the swing and the view from her back porch. In the past, farm fields and woods were all that could be seen, but much of that had been replaced by houses as the town grew and slowly swallowed up the rural countryside that was her home. The houses had crept as close to her as they could, but she still owned the fields that surrounded her home, and she had no desire to sell the rest at any price. The developers put a lot of pressure on her; that was prime building land. The neighbors put pressure on her as well; they didn’t like having a farm in the middle of their suburb.

After lunch she put on her favorite outfit, a pair of red and green plaid pants that made her think of Christmas all year round, and her flowered smock. Tillie knew the colors weren’t right together, but she couldn’t bear to choose one
over the other. She didn’t care if people looked at her and laughed; she was past caring what people thought, and she rather enjoyed the reaction of her kids when she went to church in this outfit. Church was where she was headed today, to the nursing home to pickup her school friend Linda and then to the Wednesday night service.

Going to the nursing home always gave Tillie a sick feeling in her stomach. The people there looked like they had given up and were waiting for the end. They were ghosts of their former selves, staring at the television as though it were the most interesting thing they had ever seen, or staring blankly out of the window, waiting for visitors that never arrive. Most of Tillie’s friends were either gone or stuck in nursing homes somewhere. Linda was the only one she visited; it was too difficult to see her vibrant friends reduced to utter dependence. Linda had been her best friend since they were six; Tillie couldn’t bring herself to abandon her now when she needed her most. Linda was cooped up in that nursing home, had no freedom, and never went any place, except on Wednesday evenings when Tillie took her for church. Linda always told Tillie how much she looked forward to Wednesday’s and how they made the rest of the week
bearable. That was exactly why she would never leave the farm. Let her kids
hound her all they wanted; she was not going to end up like that.

Tillie tried to make Wednesday’s pleasant for Linda. After church they
went to Culver’s for cheeseburgers and custard. They sat in a booth and giggled
like school girls as they remembered growing up and all of the fun they had
together.

“Do you remember that time we slipped out of school early to meet Jack
and Bill? It was such a hot day and the only cool place to be was the picture
show.”

“How could I forget? It was at The Wizard of Oz. I wanted to see that
movie so badly; it was worth the trouble to finally go.”

“I thought your dad would whip you and Jack both when he found out you
skipped school.”

“I didn’t think dad would ever forgive Jack for encouraging me to get into
trouble. He didn’t calm down until Jack enlisted. Then he even let us borrow his
old Ford truck so we could take a honeymoon before Jack left for the war. That
thing overheated every ten miles, but, that was the best trip I ever had.” Tillie
smiled at the memory. “How about when Bill sent you stockings home from
Germany? I think all of the girls were green with envy. You were the first in our little group to have them."

They could have reminisced for hours, but Linda had to be back to the nursing home by eight—it struck Tillie as very sad that a eighty-seven year old woman had a curfew that was earlier than her great-grandson’s—and breaking that rule would end their Wednesday trips.

The next morning, the sun rose and Tillie started her routine again, but something was different. When she got to the chicken coop, she knew that something was wrong. She tossed out the feed and went in to get eggs from the henhouse. Six of her best laying hens were missing. She thought back to the night before. Had she put all of the chickens in the coop? Maybe she had forgotten some. No, she distinctly recalled putting them in the coop and remembered Betsy, Butterscotch, Cinnamon, Freckles, Daisy, and Emma in the bunch. Cinnamon had resisted and Tillie’d had to shoo her in the coop with her cane. She kept the coop door shut at night, and it was closed when she came out this morning, so no animal could have gotten them. Somebody had to have stolen them. “Who would want my chickens?” Tillie wondered aloud. “Old Bill Wolfe’s been after me for months to repopulate his flock. Did he get tired of
waiting and decide to help himself? No, it couldn’t be Bill. I talked to him in church on Sunday, and all he could talk about was going to see his first grandson. He left for Arizona on Monday, and won’t be back for a week.” Tillie was pacing back and forth—looking very much like one of her missing chickens—as she fretted over the mystery. She snapped her fingers and stopped pacing as it dawned on her; she had overheard two of the neighbors talking in church last Sunday; they were having a big neighborhood barbeque this weekend, and they probably took her chickens to save money on meat. Tillie was so mad; she just couldn’t let the thought go. Nobody else would steal her chickens; it had to have been the neighbors.

Furious, Tillie marched back to the house, got her purse and car keys, and drove down the road to the cul-du-sac to look around. The neighbors were all at work, so no one was around to see as she peered into their garages, and looked for her beloved chickens. She looked in backyards and garages, but she found nothing. “That doesn’t mean they aren’t hiding them someplace I can’t see.” Tillie fumed, and fretted, seeing red as she thought about the theft. She needed a plan if she was going to find her chickens. Tillie drove back home and spent the
afternoon on her porch swing still fuming mad, and thinking of the best way to get to the truth. By suppertime she had figured out what she would do. Saturday dawned and Tillie was ready to execute her plan. She would go to the barbeque—uninvited since the neighbors all resented her farm and had excluded her—and confront the thieves who stole her chickens. She drove to the cul-du-sac and parked, intent on her mission, as she started walking towards the crowd, a young girl of twelve or thirteen, approached her, as she got closer Tillie recognized Jenny, her neighbor.

“Tillie, I’m so glad you came to the barbecue! It’s such a beautiful day, not too hot yet...”

Tillie held up a hand as if to stop her from speaking. “Jenny, this isn’t a social call. Somebody is stealing my chickens and I’m here to find out which one of my neighbors is the thief. I’m sure the main dish at this barbecue belonged to me; they took my best laying hens...”

Jenny looked at Tillie with her head cocked to one side, one eyebrow raised with a look of disbelief on her face.
Tillie stopped her rant and laughed; “I didn’t realize how crazy that sounded until I said it out loud. I was so angry about my missing chickens. I didn’t really think that explanation through did I?”

“They’re definitely not your chickens Tillie; I was with my mom at the grocery store when she bought them.” She took Tillie’s arm and walked with her back to the car, after looking around to make sure they were out of earshot of the crowd, she added, “Do any of them really look like they could butcher a chicken? Can you picture stuffy Mr. Carmen, in his three-piece suit plucking a chicken?” They both laughed at the vision. “Let’s go back to your house, and you can tell me what happened.”

“You’re right. If I hadn’t been so mad about this whole episode I would have thought about that myself. It just makes me so angry. Whoever is taking my chickens doesn’t realize that they aren’t just chickens to me, they’re my pets; they’re part of my family.”

Jenny had been a frequent visitor at Tillie’s farm since she was old enough to sneak through the fence. Jenny enjoyed helping with the animals, and she ran the old corn sheller so Tillie didn’t need to buy feed. The corn sheller had a seat and pedals, similar to a bicycle. Tillie couldn’t manage to ride the sheller any
more, but Jenny didn’t mind doing the riding while Tillie fed the cobs of corn into the chute. The two drove back to the farm where Tillie recounted her loss. Jenny again reassured her that the neighbors did not have the chickens. The two laugh again over the thought of the stuffy suburban neighbors plucking a chicken or even reaching under one to get the eggs.

“Maybe somebody wants to raise chickens but doesn’t know where to get them. Maybe they thought you wouldn’t miss a few and just took them...” Jenny said.

“If that’s the case, I wish they would have just asked. I would have given them some young ones to start out a nice flock.”

“Well, if somebody did take them to butcher, I hope they have a strong stomach.” They laughed again, and Jenny said; “I better get back to the party before my folks wonder what happened to me.”

“Want a ride?”

“No, that’s ok; it’s only a couple blocks. I’ll walk. Besides, I want to stop by my house on the way and get my MP3 player.”

The days passed uneventfully, no more missing chickens and no run-ins with the neighbors. On Thursday morning, Tillie found six more hens missing
from her chicken coop when she went to tend to them in the morning. She was angered by the loss but relieved that the thief had not stolen her prize chickens. Her soft and colorful Silkie Bantams—Zoe, Tessa, Snickers, and Princess—and Rosie, her feisty Plymouth Rock, were all still safe in the coop. She called the police to report the theft, but they brushed aside her complaint, telling her it sounded like a civil matter. They wouldn’t even take a report.

She decided that she had better do something, or she was likely to lose the whole flock. She called John, her grandson, who also acted as the handyman who fixed whatever was broken. John was a handsome young man in his mid-twenties with sandy blonde hair and brown eyes like his grandpa. Tillie knew she shouldn’t have favorites, but John had always been the most considerate and best behaved of her grandchildren, and she had a soft spot in her heart for him. Tillie pulled up the milk stool and kept him company while he worked at building nesting boxes inside the old milk house attached to the barn. She tapped her cane on the ground; “I sure was glad to have this the other day. I slipped in the barn when I gave Dottie her breakfast. Took me almost an hour to get back up. There’s no telling how long it would have taken if I hadn’t had my cane.” Tillie saw
the worried look on John’s face and waved him off. “I’m fine. I ought to pay more attention to where I step is all. “

“I hope you had your call button with you. I worry about you out here by yourself; I wish you’d move in to town where I could keep a better eye on you. I’d find good homes for your animals. I know a farmer who’d be happy to take them in...”

“John, don’t start that nonsense again. I’m not leaving my farm willingly. I plan to die in my own bed, listening to my own rooster crowing when I go. You won’t get me in one of those old-folks chicken coops, penned up and left to die.”

“Grandma, they aren’t that bad. You’d have friends to talk to and activities every day...” Tillie had that look in her eye, the one that had made three generations of children stop cold. He sighed, “Make sure you lock your door and carry your cane and call button when you walk around the barnyard. Don’t be afraid to use the button; that’s what it’s there for.” He turned back to the task at hand; that discussion was over. There was plenty of room around the unused milk tank in the center of the old milk house for the boxes, so he built 20 good size boxes. For good measure, he put a padlock on the milk house door for her. She would keep Zoe, Tessa, Snickers, Princess, Rosie, and a few of her other best
chickens safe in this makeshift chicken coop at night until she could get to the bottom of this.

Finished with his task, John packed his tools and got in his truck to leave. Tillie gave John a kiss; “Thanks for worrying about me John, but I can take care of myself.”

Another week passed without incident. On Wednesday night, Tillie was ready with her plan. After the news was over, she didn’t go to bed. She sat in her darkened living room and waited. She sat in the living room all night, finally falling asleep just after midnight. When she went to the chicken coop in the morning, the chickens were all present and accounted for. Tillie was relieved that her chickens were safe, but still worried the thief would return.

The next week when Wednesday evening came Tillie again followed her routine, getting dressed, picking up Linda, and going to church. When she returned, Tillie sat up in her darkened living room and waited. This time she had a pot of coffee ready, she hoped the caffeine would keep her awake. Just after midnight, she heard a car in the driveway—she was surprised to not hear the dogs barking—but knew the thief had returned for another batch of chickens. Tillie snuck out the back door and into the barnyard; she walked quietly towards
the chicken coop. “Come out of there you dirty, rotten chicken thief. I can see you moving around in my coop.” Tillie waited a few seconds, heard no reply, and saw that the figure in her coop had stopped moving. “This is your last chance; come out or you’ll be sorry.” Again, there was no response from the figure in the coop.

BOOM. Tillie fired a round from her .22 rifle towards the coop. She heard a yelp from the coop and knew she had struck her target. “Get out here before I shoot you again. This is the last time you’ll steal my chickens.”

“Grandma, don’t shoot. It’s John. I’ll come out; just don’t shoot again.”

John exited the chicken coop with his hand clasped over his upper left arm; there was blood on his shirt and more blood poured out from beneath his hand.

“John, oh my God, what are you doing in my chicken coop? I’ve shot you. Dear God, I’ve shot my grandson.”

John looked pale and Tillie helped him to the ground. She knelt beside him and reached into her pocket for the clean handkerchief she always carried, and she used it to slow the flow of blood. Tears welled up in Tillie’s eyes; “Why John? I don’t understand.”
John wouldn’t meet her eyes, he looked away and mumbled; “I worry about you grandma, I thought maybe…” John’s voice broke and he tried to fight back his tears; “I thought a thief would convince you to move.” John finally met Tillie’s gaze, his eyes filled with sorrow and pain; “How could I be so stupid…”

They heard the sirens before they saw the flashing red and blue lights in the driveway. Gunshots weren’t common in this neighborhood and the police department had received several phone calls from concerned neighbors. The small city didn’t have much excitement, and the report of gunshots brought out several squad cars as well as an ambulance. Tillie struggled to her feet, leaning heavily against the wall of the chicken coop for support, when she saw the first car. She waved her arms over her head to get their attention. “Over here, hurry.” Tillie didn’t realize she still held the .22 rifle until the first officer approached cautiously with his gun drawn.

“Drop the weapon ma’am.” He shouted in a firm, authoritative voice.

Tillie recognized Officer Collins from church; he was in the choir. She bent down and placed the gun on the ground.

“Kick it to me.”
Tillie obeyed his commands, keeping her hands in front of her; “Please, my grandson...I didn’t mean...I thought he was a thief...Help him.”

Officer Collins kicked the rifle farther away from Tillie and took her gently by the arm. “I’m sorry ma’am; you’ll have to come with me. The EMT’s are here. They’ll help your grandson.”

Tillie looked back at John with a stricken look on her face as Officer Collins led her towards the squad car. “I’m so sorry John...please forgive me. I didn’t know...”

The EMT’s loaded John onto the gurney and wheeled him past the squad car towards the waiting ambulance. As they passed the squad car Tillie shouted; “Take care of my chickens!”