



BILLIONAIRE'S

Secret

BABY

JENNIFER HARTLEY

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Prologue

ANDRE

My heart pounded as Lillian's chest heaved up to meet mine. Her skin was flush with want and excitement; it was proof I was doing something right, at least. Each of her breaths made her swell with heat and warmth against me, and I could barely stand it. It drove me crazy to feel her. I dared to slip a hand up her capped sleeve, along her shoulder. My fingers brushed the side of her breast, savoring the sensation of her silky, delicate skin hidden from me only by her lacy white blouse.

My back pressed firmly against the rough wooden trim as Lilly grabbed at my clothing. The scent of my lover outmatched the barn's woodsy smell as I nipped at her neck and exposed shoulder. I could hear her need in each breath, soft, barely ragged. She tore the buttons off my shirt, pushing her fingertips against my bare chest. I gasped with excitement—when had she grown so bold? How much of her had changed? Each of her inhalations became more urgent, and when I glanced up at her, I savored her wanting expression and ever-so-slightly parted lips. She bit me firmly on my collarbone with her rounded teeth, and I couldn't contain my gruff growl in response. The painted mare behind us, Lilly's favorite, was particularly unhappy about having uninvited guests and fidgeted nervously. Thankfully, the animals would be our only witnesses.

Returning her ferocity, I nudged her into the next stall, not aware of the black stallion that occupied it. I was just attempting to find somewhere secretive and uninhabited we could disappear to. I wanted somewhere to hide; we only

needed a few moments. That's all it would take. A few confidential moments hiding in the back of the barn would be enough to satiate our cravings for one another. Feelings we had been fighting for weeks. The horse turned and huffed at us disapprovingly; it did not want visitors. This time, Lilly's spine met the wall of the stable; I hefted her up, her thighs in my hands and her knees around my hips as I pushed against her, spreading her legs apart even more so she could feel my want through the thick denim of my jeans.

My arms tensed, biceps bulging, and a few veins ridged just below my flesh. As I held Lilly up, she stroked their outline. She was light, but I could feel the muscle she had developed over the summer at the farm, and it took all of my willpower not to devour her, to take things slower. Her strength was clouding my mind, and she nearly made me dizzy when she used her elbows to prop herself onto the edge of the stall, so her chest was more prominent. Lilly puffed out her breasts toward me. She urged me on, encouraged me. I couldn't stop staring as the crests of her swells bulged from her blouse, the buttons straining against the cloth that held them, threatening to pop at any moment. All it would take was a single flick of my finger to expose her body.

My mouth peppered tender kisses that alternated with love bites and left blooming, pink marks on her golden skin. I treated her with delicate kindness until my overwhelming need to take her made me lash out with a firm grab of her butt or a bite to her flesh. I never drew blood; I would never harm her—not again. I kissed her fiercely, savoring the taste of her sugar-sweet lips. When our mouths weren't occupied by one another's, we fought to muffle our sounds of passion. She shuddered in response to my every nip at her skin, and each of those tiny shakes was like a gold medal. My signature crooked grin lifted my cheeks as her flesh prickled over every inch—another reward.

As her excitement rose, her nipples became visible through her stretched blouse. I pinched one delicately, inciting another cry of longing from my lover. Her moan wrapped around me as I bit her collarbone again, the lowest and softest of rumbles came from deep within her chest. Lilly managed to wiggle her

way out of my grasp and directed our tangled bodies to the empty stall at the barn's end.

The moment we reached our destination, she shoved my pants down, exposing my boxers and my erect cock straining against the cotton. I kicked them into the empty space behind me, used to store loose hay for the livestock. Her eyes were on me, tracing my hardened, upright manhood with lust. As she fell backward into the sweet-smelling straw, I tugged her shirt over her head and landed on top of her.

Straddling her, my knees dug deep into the dried grass on either side of her hips. My firm grip on her breasts over her bra brought me another prize—a moan of pleasure. Like that of a wolf, she trained her steel-blue eyes on me—so enchanting. I could fall into them and be lost forever. Every little noise urged me on, and I slid down her body, trailing kisses down the line etched between her breasts to her bellybutton. My fingers undid the clasp to her pants, and I started to tug them off of her hourglass hips.

What were we doing? How did it come to this? I had come to the farm to clear my head and relax, but instead, I found the cause of my clouds—what I had been missing. One night she was my prize at prom, and the next, she was gone forever—yet there she was, years later. I was lucky; how could I not be? Lilly kicked her pants free from her ankles and spread her legs before me, her panties the only thing hiding her bare form.

I took a moment to sit up and pull my shirt off as it hung from where she tore it. The heat from the day had glistened my rippling abs with a layer of sweat. Her fingers ran over my skin, tickling me, tracing every line down to my belt. I stared down at the woman beneath me. She was so familiar yet so different than I had remembered—a mystery to me, but still someone I knew so well. Lilly had grown from a college-bound young woman into a strong and independent force who knew how to get what she wanted—and she wanted me. Thank God she wanted me. Her face glowed, and the prickling sensation that ran up and down my back overtook me.

I could no longer wait.

Flinging myself forward, I vowed to take her in before she disappeared again. This time forever would mean forever.

Lillian

The balcony was the only place I could find any kind of privacy. No one went out there. Not a single member of my family was interested in what the view of the rest of the city had to offer. I had the outdoor space all to myself. I had decorated it with a few houseplants in quirky pots, a glass coffee table, and a wicker chair with a matching ottoman. I could often be found there on early gray mornings reading some romance novel or thriller—anything to make my heart race in that boring place.

I was standing at the balcony's railing as I listened to my mother shouting about business on her cellphone in the room beyond the sliding glass doors. She was always yelling at the person on the other end of her calls. I couldn't help but feel sorry for whoever was unfortunate enough to interact with the woman. Truth be told, I often felt sorry for her, too.

Through the family business that my mother stayed home and ran, and my father traveled abroad to grow, our family had become prosperous enough to obtain a massive amount of wealth. Our apartment was the highest in the building downtown, and my mother said, at one time, I should feel like a princess overlooking Manhattan. Well, allow me to say, I felt less of a princess and more like a peasant, maybe even a fly trapped against a window, trying to get out. I could take a glimpse at that life yet wanted no part of it. I didn't belong there. All of it was too much for me.

Looking down on the city, I stroked a lock of golden hair out of my eyes and tucked it back into the ponytail I had secured with a paw-print decorated pen. My eyes were as blue as the sky that I rarely saw, and they brought me tons of compliments. I wondered if people in the city even knew what the sky looked like. Perhaps my eyes were actually gray like the smog that always hung over the city and not the brilliant blue I imagined them to be. The residents would undoubtedly know what that looked like... That was all we ever saw. I flexed a long, delicate arm and clicked my finely filed nails on the metal railing with impatience.

My family suffocated me. The city tried to stamp out any sparks that may still be burning in my soul. Sometimes I felt as if I could barely breathe, now *that* could definitely be from the smog.

Soon, the familiar sound of my brother's dress shoes clacking across the marble-tiled floor filled the air as he pursued me for the second time that week. I sighed, I couldn't help myself, and leaned on the brushed-metal railing to wait for the abuse with as much apathy as possible. The door burst open behind me, and it squeaked in its sliding hinge as William nearly toppled the little table where my succulents sat.

"When are you quitting?" William demanded to know.

He chewed obnoxiously on his gum as he referred to my job at the local coffee shop.

He detested a member of his family being a part of the service industry. Why should any of us stoop as low as the "common" class when we had millions of dollars to our name?

We weren't royalty, how arrogant to think that. However, that was William's perspective on nearly everything he did, and it infuriated me. I couldn't stand him most of the time. I heard him plop into my chair, and the wicker of the ottoman creaked under the weight of his feet. If I stayed quiet, maybe his rant wouldn't last long.

Maybe he wouldn't see me if I didn't move.

“You never sent me your resume last week. You never sent me your business model, and you never showed me your pitches. Where is your CV? What are you even doing?”

I didn't need to turn around to feel him glaring at me. His eyes bore through me like a drill. Did he treat everyone this way, or was this special just for me? Gross. I sighed reluctantly. William knew I had no intention of doing his pointless homework. I had told him hundreds of times that I had no aspiration to be like the rest of the family. I didn't want millions of dollars to throw around on the streets of New York City.

I just wanted to be myself—simple and free.

“I am *not* doing any of that. How many times have I told you? *I am fine*,” I tried to state boldly and leave nothing to interpretation. “I do *not* want anything else.” I turned to face him, and gave him my most venomous stare. It probably just looked silly, though. I leaned back against the balcony and locked my elbows as I tapped my fingers against the metal. “I'm saving up some money for an apartment anyway. I expect to have enough in a few more months so you can stop barging around like my ward. It's disgusting and super disrespectful.”

William laughed in my face, so much so that his gum almost fell out of his mouth. It was becoming a more and more common behavior for him. Where had he gone so wrong?

“You? Make a living as a barista? In New York City?” He laughed and threw back his head with an exaggerated knee slap. “Get real, Lilly. You need to follow in the family footsteps and get your act together. If you aren't going to start your own business, then you're going to join ours. Dad said he had reserved the director of advertising position for you since you're so creative and empty-headed.”

“He meant *open-minded*,” I hissed at my brother. “And I'm not interested. I don't want to be a part of whatever nonsense you people are involved in. I want to be my own person. Like I said, I'll be gone soon. I just need some time to get on my feet. I only graduated a few months ago, you know.”

That was true. I still had my very few belongings, only what could fit in half a dorm room, tucked away in my bedroom closet in the house. I didn't feel like I was at home, so I didn't bother unpacking more than I needed.

“Oh, right, and what are you going to do with a business degree as a barista? Give a lecture with every pumpkin spiced latte you hand out?” He huffed heavily at me and pulled himself out of the wicker chair, almost toppling it in the process. “Get your shit together, Lilly. You don't have forever.”

With a glare as cold as late January snow using eyes that could be mistaken for my own—though William's were frigid and heartless and mine were warmed by the sun—William left the balcony and didn't bother to close the door behind him.

He vanished into the elevator, and I breathed a sigh of relief. My mother's hollering was even more pronounced as it echoed freely around the concrete balcony.

It was true; I had gotten a business degree to make my family happy. It bought me a little more time to decide what I wanted to do with my life. Plus, I was a smart girl; school was easy for me. A's were easy to come by, and B's were few and far between. Despite my family not needing the money, I managed to snag a few scholarships for my efforts and was incredibly proud of the accomplishment. They laughed at me for caring; however, the time college bought me wasn't enough. I still had no idea what to do with myself. For a while, I threw around the idea of starting my own business, maybe as a retail operator? Maybe open a restaurant? None of those really piqued my interest, though. The only thing I knew I loved was being outside.

My tiny potted plants were the only source of green in the house. The balcony provided me a view of Central Park, but there wasn't enough vegetation in my vista to satiate my hunger. I wanted more. I craved nature and freedom. My soul ached for fresh air and blue skies and sparkling stars and whispering trees. My heart wanted to be wild.

William's intentions for me had started in high school. He had gone to the same college as his friend, Gregory, and my high school ex, Andre. They had all graduated the same year at the top of their class for business science. They had all become successful despite their ridiculously young ages, but William wanted the same for his baby sister. Two years separated us, but I wished there was an ocean putting distance between my brother and me.

When he first started to try to convince me to follow in the family's footsteps, he was kind and understanding. He at least pretended to take my ideas into account. Now? It was a one-sided argument, and I had no part to play in his act. He expected me to listen and obey, and that clashed with my personality. I am *me*, and no one else. Once I stood my ground about going to a different college than the last three generations of my family, William's tolerance for me all but disintegrated. I was reminiscing at one point in school about how close we had been as kids, but it made my heart ache.

I mourned who my brother used to be, and I feared for who he was becoming. William had been my best friend growing up, but I had no idea where that kid had gone. He had turned into some money-hungry man who left people in that dust if they didn't run at his speed. I guessed I must be pretty dirty to him because I certainly didn't move at his pace.

A few moments later, I found myself in the elevator, my blue apron tied around my waist. The coffee shop logo was clearly visible. The trip down all 105 floors felt like it got longer every single day. I dreaded the quiet time with my thoughts in the elevator since my trip was always made alone. I often preoccupied myself with my phone. The gray metal box was not a healthy place for me, absolutely not healthy at all. It was the concentrated essence of how I felt in the city—trapped, confined, surrounded, invaded, smothered. When the bell rang, and the intercom's voice indicated I had reached the ground level, I let out a sigh of relief. I passed through the ornate lobby, greeted the always cheery doorman, and went on my way to work. Thank God, a chance to get away.

I sincerely enjoyed my job working with the public, really, I did. I loved being able to talk to people and liked making my own money even more. I hated being dependent on my family despite the fact that they loved having me be dependent upon them. They often held it over my head and then excused their behavior, stating it was a tactic to get me into the family business.

While I was cleaning off one of the counters at the checkout line, I noticed some cards left for customers to take, advertising local businesses. I flicked through them out of genuine curiosity: a local grocery store, a family-owned restaurant, a farmers market, and finally, a new card that I had never seen before. “Escape your every day. Rosemary Farm and Resort”. I picked up the tastefully decorated card with a small horseshoe shadow behind the bold, black text, flipped the card over, and saw a phone number on the back along with someone’s name, Martin Grayson. I slipped the card into my pocket and vowed to give them a call. What was the worst that could happen?

Come night, after I had closed up the shop for the evening and spent an hour on the phone with Rosemary Farm, I snuck into my family apartment so that no one would hear me enter. Luckily, Mom was already asleep, and William was out, probably partying with friends or making trouble somewhere else. At least that was a positive. With the utmost care, I began packing my bags. My heart was racing. I had dreamt of that moment, almost my entire life—*freedom*. All through college, I had no idea what I wanted to do and could never find a path that suited me. I finally felt as if a spark had ignited within me, and I knew the exact direction I was going.

Something about that card, that farm, filled me with life, and that was only confirmed by my conversation with the guy on the phone. My pulse raced through my veins as I carefully folded my clothes and packed what few belongings I had unpacked when returning from college. I took great care only to take the things I had purchased with my own money, too.

I didn’t want to bring a single thing with me that I hadn’t earned or that my family had tried to impose upon me. I

wasn't going to let them guilt me into coming back, and if I brought anything they gave me, they would use that as a tool, the best one that master manipulators have. I only wanted to take myself. Everything I owned fit into two suitcases, and of course, I couldn't forget my small armful of potted plants that I snuck off of the balcony.

At one point, I thought one would crash and wake everyone up, but I managed to reign it in. I took the time to pack everything carefully and consciously. By the time I finished, the silver lining of the morning could barely be seen behind the other massive skyscrapers on the horizon. I had moved slower than anticipated in an effort not to wake anyone but it was as good a time as any to get out of there.

As I stood on the sidewalk outside of the apartment and waited for my taxi to arrive, I stared up at the massive building which I had lived in all my life. It was all I had known, and I wondered if I was making the right choice. I couldn't help but consider whether I would ever miss the place or if my family would care that I was gone. I couldn't imagine being homesick, but it might happen. The taxi I had ordered halted right in front of me, snuffing out all of those thoughts. I climbed in after tossing my bags into the other seat and handed the driver the card to Rosemary Farm, the phone and address clearly visible.

"I will pay you triple whatever you would normally charge to take someone this distance, please don't let me down." I had a desperate urgency in my voice. It was kind of embarrassing, but I needed this to work.

I needed the ability to escape and find my own life. I was practically shuddering at the proximity of my freedom. Thankfully, the driver complied, and the engine roared to life. With a sigh of relief, I sank back against the smooth leather seat. Finally, I could go somewhere where I could be the person I always wanted to be.

I hoped that the note I had left on the kitchen counter would be enough to keep my family off my tail.

Andre

Everything I could see belonged to me.

As I sat back in my massive office chair, feet up on the polished walnut executive desk, my knuckles brushed over my pursed lips in thought. I could overlook Central Park and the other gigantic buildings that outlined the only green space the city had to offer. I tapped my fingers together in displeasure.

At my age, anyone would be proud of their accomplishments if they were me, but why did I feel so miserable? I owned the skyscraper—everything in it belonged to me. Everything in it brought me massive amounts of money, and that money, in turn, bought me every want or need I could have. But something was still bothering me—missing.

Ever since I was younger, I felt as if something were absent. I was the show-off in high school. A typical scene for me would be hanging from the gym's basketball hoop while friends applauded my reach. I was also the quarterback for our team—the Metro Maulers—and proudly wore the jersey with the face of a vicious black bear. I had gone to college to be a business tycoon and ended up running one of the most successful stock trading companies in all of New York.

Last year my business grossed billions, and my image was plastered all over magazines across the country, billboards, too. Thankfully I have a handsome face. In fact, I'd had my short black hair trimmed by one of the most expensive barbers in the city just before those pictures were taken. My hairline was so crisp and sharp some joked it was drawn on with a

marker. All of the shots highlighted my chestnut-colored eyes, as well.

For most of my adult life, I had thought money was what I wanted. I was wrong. I had built my empire, and at twenty-five years old, I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but there was a hole in me that no car or house or vacation property or fancy dinner could fill. No new clothing, no golden watches, no expensive trips around the world made me feel like who I was supposed to be. There was a heavy detachment that I hid well from the rest of the world, but it weighed me down like an anchor. I couldn't help but sigh, my head falling into one of my hands as I stroked my bare, chiseled face in smoldering contemplation.

"I guess I could try giving Greg a call. He always seemed to have his head on his shoulders and an answer to life's problems," I said quietly to myself.

Gregory Robertson was one of my best friends from high school, and we had stayed close ever since. We even went to the same college and played on the football team together in our sophomore year. He, too, was a successful business mogul, but instead of stocks and numbers, he worked in construction. He had built parts of my tower and did a damn good job at it. I could see my reflection in the black marble tile that covered the elevator foyer. And the custom columnar fish tank in my living room? Absolute artwork. Greg was pulling jobs from the other millionaires around the city. I hoped he would answer.

The phone rang once... twice... three times before I heard my friend's familiar raspy voice. He sounded like a smoker, though I knew Greg wouldn't waste money on that kind of vice.

"Don't tell me you cracked that tank," Greg said, only half-joking. He was referring to a party I held at my house.

A drunken guest threw an elbow into my prized fish tank, and Greg got called at 2 am to put an emergency patch over the hole before it could be fixed properly. He made sure I would never hear the end of it.

“What? No, no, no, dude, nothing like that. I’m calling for some other kind of help.” I knew Greg could see me rubbing my hand down my face in exhaustion at his joke.

Half joke? It did happen after all. I wanted him to take the sign that I needed help without actually having to come out and say it. I wasn’t known for being the gentle or emotional type, which often got me in trouble in more ways than one.

“Do you need bail?” Now Greg was joking.

He knew with my billionaire status, I could easily buy my way out of any legal trouble I was having. I hadn’t even had a speeding ticket in over a year. That was my personal goal. I had no reason to need bail, right?

“Okay, enough kidding around. I need some help.” I almost had to grit my teeth. “I haven’t been feeling so great...”

I didn’t like to admit how I felt to others. I was a big guy, standing almost six and a half feet tall with a frame as strong as a house. Being weak or vulnerable wasn’t in my wheelhouse. I didn’t think there would ever be much that could bother me.

“Oh, yeah, okay? What’s up?”

“I just feel *off*. I’ve been working as hard as I can, and nothing I’ve done feels like enough, you know. I just feel... antsy? Like something is missing.” I cracked my knuckles nervously under the desk.

My phone sat in front of me with the speaker on, and I watched Greg’s picture as if he were talking to me in person.

Greg’s curly red hair poked out over his oversized sunglasses, almost like a wig. He was always sunburned after working outside all day. There was a longer than average pause on the other end, but Greg was never one to talk just to talk. He always thought about what he said before speaking. It was a trait I valued in my friend and wished I could embody more of. I just loved to be heard.

“Every summer, I go to Rosemary Farm. It gives me a center or a way to feel...grounded, I guess. Does that make

sense?”

“Rosemary Farm? What’s that?” I had never heard of the place before, and why would I? A farm? Filled with dirty animals? Why would anyone *want* to go there? I was starting to doubt Greg; maybe he would steer me wrong after all.

“It’s a resort. You hang out there, do some work, and get your head back straight. It helps to put the really important things into perspective. I go once a year because it helps give me a lot of peace of mind. I have a reservation in a few months. I’m pretty excited to go.”

“So, you pay money to go do someone else’s work?” That sounded like the biggest scam I had ever heard of.

“I guess if you look at it like that, sure. But there are family dinners. You can ride horses. You can even swim in the river on the property. There are no giant pools or expensive cars. At night, the lights are off, and in the morning, the sun comes up. That’s all that happens there. Try it out; I have the number here for you.”

I took the number. I wasn’t happy about it, but I took it. It was in a county about four hours away; just far enough, I wouldn’t be tempted to drive home after a day because I stepped into a pile of cow crap or something. I was able to look up some pictures online of the place, and I had to admit, the people hugging cows and relaxing in hammocks next to a field of flowers did seem nice, although I wasn’t convinced it was my cup of tea. But Greg was a different person—he was accustomed to dirt and grime and disgusting physical labor for hours on end in terrible conditions. My worst condition was an overcrowded gym, so I bought my own and put it on the fourth floor of my complex. I thanked my friend for the information, and after a pleasant chat, despite the initial call, Greg hung up. I studied the number on the pad on my desk.

“I have no clothes to wear on a farm.” I fiddled through my wallet to find one of my many debit cards and figured I hadn’t been shopping in a day or two anyway. Maybe the spree would fix my attitude before it ever came down to some dirty farm work.

Lillian

I arrived at the farm in about four hours. It was mid-morning, and the sky was bluer there than I could ever remember it being in the city. The air seemed more crisp and breathable, too. It tasted almost sweet on my tongue and felt like it could get caught in my strawberry lip gloss. The driver brought my bags to me in the gravel parking lot lined with rough-hewn log fences and decorated with massive sunflowers. Did they always grow so big? I realized I had never seen a sunflower in real life. I just assumed people exaggerated how tall they grew for Instagram.

Thanking the driver, I paid him an exorbitant amount of my small savings—I didn't want to devalue what he had done for me. That was something my family would have done, something I was trying to avoid. I hitched one of my suitcases to my belt to drag along behind me. I had one arm filled with potted plants, and the other carried the leather name-brand bag. I didn't care if it got scuffed by the chunky gravel that crunched under my feet. Birds sang loudly throughout the property, and as I ducked under a flower-filled archway, the street-facing side of a massive and beautifully redone colonial farmhouse greeted me.

The white paint on the building was enough to blind me, but the beauty of the place floored me. It had a wrap-around porch that took up two sides and was, in turn, covered by a red metal roof: creeping vines and satiny deep-purple flowers tangled through the railings. Chairs sat around gaming tables

for chess and checkers, cards and dominos. An occasional bench or bench-swing dotted the space for people to relax.

Honeybees could be seen on all levels of the home as they appreciated the flower boxes outside every single window all the way up to the third story. Two stone chimneys capped the home and contrasted nicely to the brightness of the walls and roof. Smoke billowed out of one of them, and I could smell the sweet scent of breakfast pastries wafting out of the now-open door. I almost hadn't realized a man approached, and only acknowledged him after providing me with a gruff greeting.

"Lillian Rushmore?" he asked, and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

The old man had a face of leather and lines, but his eyes were emeralds of happiness topped with white clouds for brows. His crooked smile was most likely a handsome thing in his time, and he held a hand out to me in greeting. "I'm Mr. Arnold Frey. We spoke on the phone yesterday."

His voice was as solid as granite and his hands as firm as steel when I shook his respectfully.

"Hello, Mr. Frey. Thank you for bringing me on with such short notice. I sincerely appreciate the opportunity. I know accommodating someone isn't the easiest." I was one of the only members of my family with actual people skills, thanks to my public service work.

I always tried to be respectful and honest and show my thanks for everything around me.

The older man nodded a few times in recognition of my statement. He seemed pleased? Was that the correct word? Did I say the right thing?

"WE GET plenty of workers with only a day or two notice; some leave the same way. No harm is done either way as more always manage to show up." He clasped his hands behind his back. "So, you said you wanted a place to work, correct? No offense, ma'am, but you do understand that you are signing up for *farm* work, right?"

He gave me a nod, gesturing to my outfit.

I hadn't considered changing out of my New York City apparel. What counted as suitable attire in the heart of NYC most certainly wouldn't fly out there. I almost blushed at my stupidity and gave a breathy laugh to try and excuse myself.

"Oh, yes, I know. I left so quickly that I didn't have much time to change. I know farm work is difficult work, but this is right for me. I promise I'm a hard worker, and I'm willing to learn just about anything you need me to."

Was he going to turn me away? Did I make such an unfavorable statement that I could have risked having the last chance to find who I really was? What would I do if he declined to have me, crawl back home and listen to William talk about how he was always right? My thoughts started to spiral, and I had more "what ifs" than could be counted swirling around in my head. My brow furrowed with worry.

"Well, no harm, no foul. Let me give you a little bit of a tour."

I audibly released the tension. I was holding in a massive breath. When had I stopped breathing?

"I would love that!"

Mr. Frey stood on the threshold of the massive red double door that led into the home and ushered me inside. He took the bag tied to my belt and set it in the foyer where we entered. We stood in a room that was wall-to-wall dark hardwood, which I learned online were the original floor beams from back when the home was constructed in 1772. When the Freys remodeled, they tried to keep as much of the original home *in* the home as possible, even if it wasn't its original place.

Mr. Frey looked around, speaking as if we had been standing there for hours, talking about the house. "This place is a true colonial treasure. Our family inherited it, and it's now a historical site. We had been entrusted to upkeep the Rosemary Estate and did so by turning it into a functional farm about ten years ago. When farming wasn't paying off, we decided to open our doors to the public for help. We were

astonished at the number of people who would pay to escape the dreadful city life and spend some time with us in the country. They would get the sweat and sadness out of them with a few days of hard labor, rewarded with sweet relaxation, and then return home rejuvenated. It's a different style of getaway."

"Wow," I replied, following his gaze around. "I definitely never heard of anything like it."

His nose twitched, and he grunted, nodding his head. "Was my daughter's idea. Come on, then, I'll show ya around the house real fast."

He waved his hand, and we did a brief walkthrough of the house. I even managed to take a quick peek into the kitchen where Mrs. Frey, who resembled what I could imagine Mrs. Clause would look like, was cooking breakfast over a massive cast-iron stove built into the kitchen wall. It vented out through the chimney I had seen outside. The source of the sticky, sweet smell I had caught outside was the mountain of pancakes sitting on the counter for the guests.

Outside was another story. Each inch of the farm was groomed to be a safe haven of relaxation while also creating plenty of work for guests during their stay.

Mr. Frey stopped by one of the fences and lifted one foot up on the bottom piece of wood, resting his hands on his knees. "So many people from the city found their passion for gardening here. Some had never seen trees or this much grass in their lives, and all of a sudden, they fell in love with taking care of them. I encouraged them to keep up with their new-found hobby when they returned home, and some call or write us a letter saying how they were able to create a green space for themselves."

I smiled and nodded. It warmed my heart and spoke to me. The city was terrible and desolate compared to there. I could sympathize with the amount of blessing a green space would have given me in my parent's apartment, but it was nothing compared to the farm.

Walking past one of the many barns, Mr. Frey nodded in its direction. ” That houses our twenty prized horses for recreational and working use.”

Plenty of people milled about the structure; some of the farmhands were bringing horses into or out of the stable, and others were providing instructions to guests for morning rides. Others were brushing some of the animals to ensure they were at peak condition for work that day. As we passed by the barn, I saw one of the most beautiful mares I had ever seen.

“Wow, she’s beautiful.”

Mr. Frey smiled, walking over to her and rubbing his hand under her chin. “This here’s Blotches. She’s one of our most gentle-hearted creatures.”

She was large, her back taller than me, though, with my height, that didn’t count for much. Her coat was a beautiful rusty brown with glistening white blotches true to her name. It looked as if someone had splashed a can of paint over her. Her mane was a perfectly white sheet down her neck, and her tail was a fluffy red tendril that threatened to brush the ground but never did. She was a gorgeous animal, and my heart lightened even more than I thought it could.

We spent most of the afternoon touring the property. I saw the dam where water was caught from rain runoff and used to irrigate fields, water flowers, or animals. I saw the 100-acre woods (no, no affiliation) where trails were twisted and turned through the old-growth forest that was an official state nature preserve. Acres of fields grew fresh produce, and I learned that they made most of their own food, except cattle. Chickens scooted out of our way as we neared a row of “tiny homes” lining the back of the property.

A woman approached Mr. Frey and me and raised a hand in a wave with a warm greeting.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Anna,” she said in a tone as smooth as butter.

She was a tall girl with an athletic build, no doubt from working on the farm all day. She had dark-brown hair,

probably something that at one time resembled her parent's hair, but her parents were now as white as Blotches' spots. Anna wore a green T-shirt and some well-worn overalls with ankle-high leather boots that had seen better days—the exact opposite of who I would find wandering the streets back home.

“Good morning, Anna. This is our new hand, Lillian. Why don't you give her the rest of the tour and show her to her living quarters?” Mr. Frey said pleasantly, motioning to the adorably tiny row homes.

Anna nodded enthusiastically. “Certainly, Daddy. Follow me. I'll show you the workers' area.”

Anna held out her hand and helped me carry some of the potted plants that had gotten quite awkward during the tour.

Mr. Frey excused himself to return to the house, his slow pace giving him a leisurely persona as he tottered back in to grab a snack from his wife.

“So, what brings you all the way out here? Where are you from?” Anna's voice was quick and spirited and high pitched. She was bright and full of energy and very refreshing.

“New York City, Manhattan specifically. I wanted to get away,” I stated shyly.

It wasn't false; I just didn't say what I was getting away from—my family.

“Shoot, you're in for a real surprise out here. I'm sure everyone has told you. Farm work isn't what all the movies make it out to be. There's dirt. There's grime. But there are also really good times.” She smiled, her rose petal lips parted widely to expose a crisp white smile. “Don't worry. It can be intimidating, but I don't mind helping. It'll be nice to have you around. Better than the old bitties and farm men anyway.”

“Well, thank you for having me; nonetheless, I really don't want to be a bother. I just wanted somewhere I could go to get away from it all. Somewhere I could finally take a breath and not have to worry about being judged for how I do it.”

We were walking in front of the line of tiny homes. Each house matched the main farmhouse's white siding but had a

different colored metal roof—red, green, purple, pink, orange, blue, and all different shades in between. The tiny front porch on each fit two chairs, a table, and a little house number from 1 to 20. With perfectly groomed flowerbeds in front, they were framed with a makeshift white gravel sidewalk that connected them. It was like a little neighborhood and was heart-wrenchingly charming.

“This is adorable!” I exclaimed, nearly clasping my hands to a cheek. I could barely contain herself. “What a cute little neighborhood!”

Anna laughed and nodded approvingly. “Thank you. They are charming when you first see them. Some don’t take too kindly to living in cramped quarters, but for one person and only the things you need, you find a smaller home is a simpler home. I opted to stay in one myself.” She leaned closer to me and put her hand up to block her voice from traveling. “Had to put some space between the family and me, you know? It was getting a little claustrophobic.”

We both shared a laugh, and I expressed my understanding.

We walked down the row to the last house available with a lilac-colored roof, and the number 20 hammered into cast iron on the pale-purple door. Anna took out a set of keys and flipped through until she saw one with a lilac painted top and 20 written on it. She unlocked the door and swung it open, inviting me to enter first.

The inside was well organized. Everything was laid out and planned so meticulously that every single inch of the house was used for storage, utility, or otherwise. I set my bags down next to the door under the coat rack on the wall and stepped fully inside. The maple floor was bright and light to walk on. The kitchen was only a few countertops wide with a double stovetop and a little oven under it. Part of the counters acted as a bar with two stools under it for dining.

Beyond the kitchen was a sitting area where the couch’s seats folded up for additional storage within it. A TV was anchored to the wall across from the sitting area with a small

stand for extra storage below it. The front part of the house had a cathedral ceiling, and the back was split into two levels. The downstairs was the bathroom, and upstairs was a balcony-style bedroom.

Light from the windows and skylights flooded the entire house, yet it was surprisingly cool from the trees that shaded the area. I had never seen such a rainbow of birds—the most colorful thing I ever saw in the city was a particularly smart-looking pigeon. Starchy white sheets fitted the double bed along with a puffy down comforter. It was so inviting I almost leaped into it.

“What do you think?” Anna asked as she went through and checked all the drawers and doors for functionality. “These units, 15-20, were only built this year, so they are brand-spankin’ new. We had no idea this program would be so successful, so we had to splurge for five more of these tiny homes.”

I was almost speechless. This entire house was about the size of my bedroom back in New York that my family had stuffed full of decorations, clothes, furniture, and just so much crap over the years. It made my head feel cluttered every time I saw it, but I didn’t consciously think about it until that moment. That place felt so clean and neat and free. I had no idea that I needed so little.

“It’s perfect!” I yelled over to my new friend, almost breathy with pride and excitement and eagerness. “Thank you so much!”

“Don’t mention it one bit. So, you only have two suitcases, huh?” Anna tapped the pot of the moon glow plant I had been nurturing for five years with little results. “Well, and these scraggly little things. This is it? Do you need anything else? Work starts in the morning bright and early, so it only leaves you a little bit of time to get your bearings and coordinate yourself.” Anna motioned to my outfit. “To be honest, you seem like you might get a little bit lost, speaking of ‘coordinate.’”

I tried to stutter some quickly formed excuse, but Anna knew I wasn't prepared.

"You wait right here and start unpackin'. I will be right back." With that, Anna took off, and I was left to my own devices.

I took my two suitcases and unpacked them in a matter of minutes. All of my clothing fit into two drawers under the stairs. And I only had the shoes on my feet—some cloth sneakers with logos all over them. My plants fit on the windowsill upstairs, where they would receive a wash of afternoon sun. After a little bit, as I was just starting to feel comfortable and at home, Anna returned with her arms full.

"Here you go, girly—just what you need!" She flung herself through the door and plopped a pile of folded clothing onto the coffee table—a few pairs of jeans, graphic T-shirts, and boots. There was also a scrunchie in the mix that matched the one keeping Anna's hair out of her eyes, save for a few loose baby bangs that wouldn't be tamed.

I was taken aback by the kindness and generosity, and Anna wouldn't take any of my thanks or offers of payment.

"No problem, they were old anyway, and yearning for a new home. I would roll the jeans up though, for safety. I'm a bit taller than you."

"Of course," I replied, never having been so excited over hand me down work clothes in my life.

The two of us spent the rest of the afternoon together and became quick friends. Despite our "city mouse and country mouse" feelings, we were like two grapes from the same bunch. Anna filled me in on all the farm happenings. Later in the afternoon, just as the sun was dipping below the tree line and the sky was the color of slate, she gave me my first assignment for the morning, which made me smile from ear to ear.

In the morning, I would learn to groom the horses.

Lillian

Days on the farm bled into one another in the most wonderful of ways. Yes, my first day was difficult. I learned how to brush and bathe horses, and I learned how to clean their hooves of packed dirt and how to care for their mane and tail. I learned how to give them water and food, and I especially loved the scent of their molasses oats. Finally, at the end of the day, I got to clean out their stalls. This was easily the dirtiest thing I had done in all my life, well, up until that point.

I was used to being surrounded by proverbial crap, but never in all my days could I have imagined being surrounded by mountains of literal crap. While my muscles were burning and my joints were aching by the time I fell into bed, something in me still felt right. I earned the rest at night; it made me feel accomplished. I deserved to sleep because, for once in my life, I was actually tired. Exhausted. Spent.

As I drifted off to sleep, I thought about how I could feel the prickle of a slight sunburn across my shoulders. I remembered how wonderful a shower had felt, and the crisp cool water against my sweaty skin was the icing on the cake as it washed all the dirt of the day down the drain. All of my problems were washed away, too. Better yet, no one from my family, not my parents or my brother, had texted or called me. My cellphone stayed in my house, and my mind was free from the social clutter that it brought.

Each day passed with the same ease as the last. For the first week, I was given an assignment. The first day was horse

work. I had that down pat. The second day was housework. I was invited in by Mrs. Frey and given a more thorough tour of the house. The first floor was for living. There was the beautiful and rustic kitchen I had seen during my initial walkthrough, which bled into a cozy yet elegant dining room that was almost entirely filled with a custom dining table that could easily fit fifty people. The dining room windows overlooked the crops. Mrs. Frey remarked on how she enjoyed summer dinners in the late evening when the fields would twinkle with fireflies.

There was a sitting room that was triumphed by a massive stone fireplace that had been the original when the home was first built. On the chimney that led up to the second floor was a massive moose skull and antlers that spread out like branches of a tree. A smoking parlor hung off the back of the house, but Mrs. Frey assured me that no smoking was allowed out here. Rosemary Farm was a place to quit harmful habits. It was instead converted twenty years ago into a solarium filled with houseplants that she tenderly maintained when not cooking for an army.

Upstairs were guest and owner lodgings. I was shown guest rooms that were outfitted with a single-sized bed, a nightstand, a wardrobe, and a writing table with a single chair. There was no TV and no other distractions. There was also only a single lamp in the room and a men and women's communal bathroom, each having two showers and two toilet stalls. Everything felt so comfortable and quaint. I just couldn't get over the constant feeling of belonging and relaxation despite my never-ending workload.

The longer I stayed at the farm, the more changes I noticed in myself. I had gotten stronger, or perhaps I had become strong for the first time in my life. I could feel my arms becoming toned and my belly becoming firm and flat. My butt started to fill out Anna's pants a bit better, too. My hair lightened even more than it was when I had initially arrived, the sun bleaching it more and more every day. Some days Anna would even spray some lemon juice in my hair to make sunny highlights.

I also felt myself change as a person, too. I became more patient.

My work was simple but tedious and sometimes frustrating, and patience was required to make sure I could get through my day. I was more reflective and quiet. I did much more listening than talking, which allowed me to see I was actually missing out on in a lot of my interactions. I enjoyed listening to my friends and felt I got more from each conversation than I would have before. That made my heart soar, but something seemed just out of my reach.

I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Was it my own property rather than living on the farm? Sure, that would be nice. It was my dream for later in life, but not yet. When explaining the feeling to Anna, my friend couldn't help me. No suggestions seemed to hit the nail on the head. I often became frustrated if I lingered on the thought for too long, so I frequently pushed it to the back of my mind and attempted to focus on something else when it came up.

Still, I couldn't help but feel that something was out there meant for me, and each day made me feel like it was closer than the last. I made plenty of friends at Rosemary Farm and eventually considered Mr. and Mrs. Frey like parents of my own despite my very short stay. I hadn't even heard from my own family in about a month or so. Since I left, no one had bothered to contact me.

Did I care? Well, I tried not to, but I couldn't help feeling abandoned despite being the one to leave. How little could my own family care about me that they would be all right with my disappearing into the night, stating that I would never return? Had Mom and Dad realized I was gone? They were always so busy with work that they rarely noticed the kids, even when we were young. I had known my nanny better than either of my parents. When my mother overheard me accidentally call the nanny "mommy" as a toddler, the nanny was blamed for an expensive piece of jewelry that went missing and was supposedly run out of town. William told me that story before he changed into who he was... Back then, he cared about others. Now he was as heartless as our parents.

So, if I wasn't missing friends or family, what could it be? One evening after finishing my chores particularly early, I escaped to house 20. I sat under the lilac roof on the front porch in one of the little chairs. I watched everyone move around, bustling about to get chores done. I watched all the little birds clamoring for seeds and nibbles on the sidewalk. I watched bugs and bees, and butterflies scoot from one flower to another, filling my view with colors and my ears with pleasant sounds, but still, I couldn't put my finger on the issue. Despite loving my place in life, my heart didn't feel entirely full.

Andre

The sun was just coming up over the white and red farmhouse as my car roared up the gravel path toward the farm. A moment later, my Valkyrie, black as night without any shine to the paint, pulled into the parking lot of Rosemary Farm. I stopped sharply in a parking spot, the gravel crunching uncomfortably under its tires. For a moment, I sat in the driver's seat without moving.

Is this really what I want to be doing?

I had dressed in some fashionable jeans and a white button-down with sandals. In the mirror on my downward-facing visor, I looked into my own eyes, even if they were covered by sunglasses. I felt silly.

Who paid to come to a farm to do work?

"Me," I said to the reflection, and with that, I exited my vehicle.

I was greeted by a staff member who came out to help me with my bags. "Mornin'. Welcome to Rosemary. I'll get those bags for ya."

While the employee loaded my many suitcases and duffel bags onto the dolly, I took in the property a bit and approached the house. Admittedly it was charming, very similar to what it had looked like on the card and website. People were everywhere, everyone with a different bucket, shovel, or tool in their hand. I flinched as a bumblebee abruptly headbutted my arm and flailed to get it away from me, disgusted.

Thankfully, the employee was ready with my things and took me to the room on the house's second floor.

Aghast. That was probably the only word I could use to describe the situation and my initial reaction.

"What is *this*?" I asked the worker who was stacking my mountain of stuff against the wall in the 14x10 bedroom.

"It's your room, sir? Number 34 just as registered on your itinerary." The boy handed me the slip of paper for the check-in. "Is something wrong?"

"It's so small; that's what's wrong, no one told me I would be living in a closet!" I held my arms out to either side. "Where am I supposed to set up my computer for work? Where am I supposed to lounge?"

I could feel myself getting angrier and angrier, an unfortunate trait that had gotten me into trouble in the past.

"We pride ourselves on simplicity here. Your room should only be for resting and storing your things. Once you get settled, you will have your first meal with the group this evening, and then tomorrow, work starts. You won't have much time to be in here once you get your schedule and into the nitty-gritty of it all. I promise you won't regret it!"

With that, the guy exited the room, closing the door after himself and leaving me to my thoughts, which I didn't like.

I tried to find a Wi-Fi signal on my phone. Maybe I could at least scroll some social media to take my mind off of things, but there wasn't even a signal for cell service, let alone Wi-Fi. I threw the phone onto the neatly made gingham bed in a huff of rage and rubbed my hands down my face.

"This was a mistake, and now I am stuck here for a month. Greg really led me in the wrong direction."

After I spent an embarrassingly long time pouting in my room, staring at the ceiling like some kind of spoiled teenager being grounded for fabled wrongdoing, I finally left in an attempt to get some fresh air. Descending the elegantly detailed wooden staircase, I was greeted by the house's lady, Mrs. Frey, who was getting things ready for a knitting circle

that afternoon. She introduced herself with a musical tone in her voice—no one in the city ever sounded *that* cheery.

“Welcome to the farm, sweetheart!” she announced, her cheeks round and rosy, and her face covered in delicate little lines. “Boy, aren’t we lucky to have someone as strapping as you here to help keep things running! Dinner is at seven this evening; don’t be late, got it?”

She lowered an eyebrow and wagged a finger at me in a faux discipline before giving me a wave and heading into the sunroom. There was a group of women and a child or two waiting for her.

I peeked into the sun-washed room after the old woman. Everyone seemed happy, and those who didn’t seem to know one another chatted idly between themselves. That was also something not done in the city, and I couldn’t wrap my head around it. Never in my life did I care to talk to a stranger. Minding your own business was the theme of New York. I got in less trouble following that rule.

“There you are,” the guy from check-in said, tapping me on the shoulder.

“Here I am,” I sighed, moving out of the way as another group passed into the sunroom.

“Sorry, my name’s Ethan. I wanted to go ahead and get you the itinerary, so it didn’t get forgotten,” he said, handing me a sheet of paper. “It’s got everything you need to know, but if you have any questions, you can ask any of us.”

I thought about not taking it but reluctantly did anyway. “Thanks.”

He nodded with a smile and walked off. I watched him until he disappeared from view and sneered as I held the paper out in front of me.

August 1: Arrival and settling in. Please enjoy your adventure and take some time to walk the grounds and meet other guests. Dinner is at 7 pm every night except Sundays (5 pm).

I huffed. Usually, my day was so structured with some kind of business activity or social event that I never had time to just “wander” around somewhere. I didn’t like feeling so aimless. I didn’t like not having the outside world to interact with on my phone. But that was what I was paying for, right?

“Okay, so today is shot, what about tomorrow? The kid said something about work.” I flipped to the next page and looked at the rest of the scheduled itinerary.

August 2: Morning—horseback riding and care. Lunch at noon. Afternoon—gardening lessons and plant care. Dinner at 5 pm. Evening—social event in the barn, square dancing, and refreshments.

With a little bit of resignation in my throat, I sighed and folded the paper, shoving it in my back pocket. Grumbling to myself, I ambled through the hallway, glancing at all the farm-themed knick-knacks. “I guess the only thing I can do is lean into it.”

I was always a good sport when trying something new, but that mostly pertained to things within my own wheelhouse—sports, athletics, hiking, rock climbing, clubbing. They were all things I liked to do. I had never had the itch to go square dancing. I decided that the least I could do was enjoy the gardens for a while until dinner. I headed out the front door and around the back of the house, where I disappeared into the meticulously maintained rose garden.

Lillian

I was enjoying time in the barn in the early afternoon. Blotches and I had gotten quite close, at least I assumed we had. The mare had a temperament of gold and seemed to enjoy me talking to her as I braided her mane in all the different patterns that Anna had shown me over the last few weeks. I was busy decorating the creature in intricate little roses made of slipknots and slack created from the glistening white hair. Her tail was already braided and decorated with pink ribbon—the color I assumed suited her best. As I led her out to pasture for the afternoon to graze on the sweet summer grass, I saw Anna approaching and waved her over.

“Hey there, how are you?” I asked, my voice was peppy and fresh and reflected all of the positive improvements I felt from working on the farm.

“Great, thanks for asking,” replied Anna, dressed in her signature overalls, but this time they were splattered with paint. “Say, do you want to come to help me set up for the party in the barn tomorrow evening? We were going to give the inside a fresh coat of paint and hang some decorations. Should be fun?”

Anna gave my shoulder a tap and opened the gate to the pasture for me where Blotches let herself in after being untethered.

“You don’t need to twist my arm. I’m free now, anyway. There are more guests than usual lately, so I don’t have as much to do on the days I am assigned to the horses.” It was true, the more guests there were, the fewer little chores the employees were expected to complete.

Guests were often given the easiest and least taxing tasks on the farm to give them the experience of getting something done while not completely exhausting them. Employees were expected to supervise and help where needed and ensure the safety of guests. Some would take the guest on trail rides or tractor rides around the property, too. They were all a form of ease and entertainment to those who were being paid to stay there.

“Oh, thank goodness, we were a little short-staffed, and you know your way around a paintbrush. I saw that giant painting you put on that old shutter we tried throwing out last week.”

We walked off toward the barn across the grazing field for the horses. I had learned how to use some simple tools and removed an old shutter on one of the horse stalls. It made me feel particularly proud since it was something I could do by myself. Rather than throw the piece out since it wasn’t rotten, just a little worn, I kept it and took it home with me. Using some art supplies I had gotten on a run into town, I painted a

horse on the shutter that looked as if it were poking its head out of the stall into a corral. I was really quite proud of it.

I never really considered myself artistic but out there where everyone was encouraged to take a minute to enjoy the things around them, I had an easy time putting the image in my mind to paper. I felt as if I had grown so much during my stay at Rosemary Farm. I no longer felt claustrophobic and cluttered, and my thoughts came more easily and clearly than they had before.

Together, Anna and I worked in the barn with several other people to give everything a fresh coat of paint, set up some tables and decorations, and make sure everything was set for the party. It wasn't a fancy NYC club or swanky bar, but I was pretty excited anyway.

Andre

Up and down and up and down. I was taught how to “post” or correctly position myself and manage the horse’s movement under me, but I just didn’t feel like I was getting it right. I felt jostled, and my crotch hurt from the weird angle of my legs.

“And over here, you will see our fir tree grove that was planted over 100 years ago by previous owners to...” The trail guide tapered off in my head.

I understood that they were all very nature conscious, but I couldn’t care less about fir trees. I caught where the guide was pointing and looked up at the massive bushy pines.

They are pretty, though...

I caught myself in another out of character thought. That was something that had happened more and more as I was out there on that trail. While an employee helped me saddle the horse earlier, I gave the creature a scoff when it sniffed me, tickling my cheek with its stiff bristly whiskers. Deep in the back of my mind, I thought, however, that the animal wasn’t as bad as I presumed it would be and even seemed to be nicer than I imagined. I had shaken that thought away as quickly as it had come.

Horses were dirty, stinky, expensive animals, and I had no business with them. Now? Well, the horse I was riding, Filbert, didn’t seem all that bad. He was a dun buckskin, or so I was told. It apparently meant that the horse had a light-tan coat with black legs, mane and tail, and a black line down its back. Evidently, horses came in all shapes, sizes, and colors, and

there were fancy names for each and every one of them—more than “brown” and “black” and “white.” It all seemed a little over the top, in my opinion.

As I rode along, letting useless thoughts rattle around, I suddenly noticed I had gotten the concept of posting. I must have been thinking too hard about it, and it had come subconsciously when I wasn't paying attention. Up, down, up, down. This time it was in time with the horse's steps so that I wasn't being bounced and jostled, but rather lifted out of the saddle using the stirrups when the creature brought its weight down. With an approving nod, I gave Filbert a bit of a tap with my heels to have him keep up better with the rest of the group. Filbert was trying to snag some grass along the trail and having trouble walking and eating.

“Me too, buddy,” I said softly to the big guy and even reached down to pat its thick, muscular neck with a shadow of affection.

Lillian

I was in the barn cleaning out some of the stalls from overnight use as the guests were all out on their morning ride, and things were quiet and empty. An elderly horse was staying behind to keep me company. Mr. Frey said that she had been the first horse to come to the farm, an adopted mare from a less-than-happy home that needed some love and care before she could be ridden. She was fattened up, and Mr. Frey had even slept in the barn with her on the most touch-and-go of nights, Anna and himself taking shifts.

After all of their hard work and dedication, they determined she wouldn't be a working horse after all. Instead, she seemed to provide a sense of calm and direction to the other horses. Having her around made them easier to train for their purposes. She was like a mother to the entire herd, and they were thankful for her. I snuck her an extra cup full of molasses oats as I went around and filled each stall's feed bucket for breakfast when the group returned. The old girl snorted with happiness and buried her face into the feed.

A few hours passed, and I was just finishing up sweeping out the barn's main throughway when I saw the group of guests returning, trail guide at the lead. He walked his horse up to me. "How'd everything go with the new group?"

"Oh great, it's been a little while since we had a group this big. It was nice having everyone out and about."

He dismounted and helped direct others into the barn as well, helping them climb down off the massive animals, who patiently waited through the process.

As they did so, they would hand the horse's bridle over to me, and I put the horses away in their specific stalls as the guests went on their way to lunch in the house with Mrs. Frey.

I closed one of the stall doors and turned back around for the next. Standing nose to nose with me was Filbert, forgetting that people tended to like a little room around them. He was one of the youngest geldings and had more personality than he could contain; it often got him into trouble. His lips wiggled at my ponytail, and he tried to nibble it up, mistaking it for a spring of fresh hay.

"Hey, now, you, get out of here." I pushed his big tan head away from me, giving a scratch on the white star between his deep-brown eyes. When I did so, I could see someone was standing behind him, waiting for me to take his reins.

"Oh, here, thank you for bringing him over," I said, reaching out to grab the leather strap but almost choked on my breath when I saw who I was talking to.

"Lillian?" Andre gasped. His thick, dark brows pushed themselves together to make a mountain between them, and his razor-sharp, chestnut eyes trained themselves on me like a hawk's. "Lilly? Is that really you?"

I couldn't believe it was Andre. We had been high school sweethearts, but due to... well due to a disagreement, we ended up separating and going to different colleges. We had even gone to prom together and were known as the couple everyone talked about. He was the football team captain, and I was some bookworm who didn't fit his stereotype.

“Yes-yes, it’s me. Andre, why are you here?” I asked, reaching out and grabbing his forearms as if I didn’t believe he was really there. I gave him a brisk shake, his hands flapping around comically as I did so. “I thought you were off being king of the world somewhere far away from here?”

He chuckled and freed himself from my grasp. “Yeah, well, I have to admit, I didn’t think I’d run into anyone I knew. You know, sporting jeans and a t-shirt...and whatever else I happened to pick up this morning.”

He normally dressed to impress, even in leisure clothing.

“And not far away, no. I never got out of New York City, but does anyone?” He laughed. “You seem to be an exception. How did you find yourself all the way out here? Are you vacationing, too?”

“No, actually, I wanted to get out of the city and do something a bit more ‘me.’ I work here.” I was very proud of myself.

I did know, however, that Andre was one to judge someone in my position. People who did physical labor were considered *less*. At least he used to be that way.

“Well, I guess I can’t blame you.”

His response was surprisingly refreshing for me to hear.

He rubbed the back of his neck, resting his hand on Filbert’s side. “I guess I’m out here kind of under the same circumstance. I wasn’t feeling well back in the concrete jungle, so Greg actually recommended I come to stay out here for a while, clear my head.”

“Oh my gosh, I haven’t seen Greggy in forever. I hope he’s good. William still talks to everyone. I just don’t talk to William.”

“Everyone back home is good. Things are going really well for him. His construction company just won’t stop pulling in work, so he keeps his nose to the grindstone.”

“Better than getting it into trouble, right?” I chuckled and gave a shrug, tilting my head to the side.

Filbert went after my hair again and flapped his lips against my ear. The horse knew it was breakfast time, and our bantering was getting between him and his sweet oats.

“Let me get this big lug in for breakfast, and then I can walk you up to lunch if you’re okay with that?” I said over my shoulder as I led the horse down the throughway of the barn, the gentle cool breeze from the shaded area brushing what hair had come free from my ponytail across my face.

“Sure, yeah,” he replied, chuckling.

With the bolt’s clicking on Filbert’s door, I brushed my hands on my pants and waved Andre along after me. He followed beside me and looked down, trying to make eye contact. It was a little silly. He had gotten so tall, about a head taller than me.

“I’m amazed at how I different you are from the last time I saw you. The tan definitely suits you.”

I chuckled. “What? That, never see the light of day, vampire, cave dweller, bookworm look wasn’t in style?”

My skin and hair were both sun-kissed from my time on the farm. But, I was pale back when he had seen me last- the summer before I went off to college. Sitting in a library in the dark and gloomy city had given my skin a gray undertone and made me look partially dead when we were younger. I often remarked that it gave me another relating factor to the thriller books I loved to read. Instead of relating to the main character, the hero, I felt more like the zombies or the monsters or even the murder victim, which often pulled a chuckle from him. He rarely laughed during the time we were splitting up. Now his laughter seemed to come much easier.

“So really, why are you here?” I asked him again. “I can’t imagine just because Greg said ‘go to a farm’ you actually just got up and did it. What are you doing?”

I looked up at him. I noticed he couldn’t help but stare into my eyes; he seemed transfixed, which was flattering but a tad unnerving when his gaze was so powerful. When he noticed he

was staring, he shook his head as if to clear a cloud and kept his eye forward.

“Ah, well, I bought the skyscraper on 76th Street downtown. I have the most expensive cars I could buy. I have been to seventeen different countries on vacations, and I own a yacht for parties. Greg said that I couldn’t buy the feeling of a hard day’s work, so I wanted to prove him wrong.”

Why was he boasting like that? Sure, he had always gotten women with money before, but why did he care about me? He had given me up a long time back. He no longer wanted to impress me.

“I’m already sore, so I think I won this bet, huh?” He chucked breathlessly to himself.

I didn’t laugh.

“Ah, same as ever then, I guess?” I quipped. “William is all about money, too. He was fighting with me almost every single day after I got home from college to find some way to increase my net worth. If I weren’t willing to comply with the path he had set for me, he treated me like garbage. All of my family did. That’s the real reason I left.”

I sounded genuinely sad and for a good reason. It all made me feel disgusted with the people I came from. My voice had a bit of a rasp in it from being out in the heat that morning. I hoped Andre only found that charming.

“Oh... I’m sorry to hear that, Lilly.” His tone was quiet.

“Nah, don’t be, they don’t seem to miss me now that I’m gone. I guess I was as much of a burden on them as William said I was. I don’t feel bad.” I gave him a blinding-white smile, trying to impress him and seem unfazed, hoping my pink lips framed my perfect white teeth in a stunning grin.

I had freckles thanks to all the sunny work—Andre loved a girl with a few freckles...

“Well, it still sucks. But you seem like you’re so much happier here. You seem like a whole new person. I honestly barely recognized you until you said my name. You could’ve passed right under my nose, and I would’ve never known it.”

I laughed. It was a charming, soft sound that I hoped caressed his ears like cotton. What the heck was going on? Our last interaction consisted of the complete breakdown of our relationship. I was always great at burning bridges—Andre had told me that my best skill was using the light from the flames to show me the path to a new bridge. I had laughed it off at the time, but he didn't find that quality particularly attractive. I tried to act like it didn't bother me, but of course, it did; how couldn't it? I thought I was better, but then again, I came to the farm to grow. Hopefully, I had only improved from who I used to be. Hopefully, he had improved, too. We both had enough room for it, after all.

“Things have been wonderful. I had never seen so many trees before moving out here, and I have so many friends now. Honestly, the Freys are like a family to me. My parents never treated me as nicely as they do.”

After making sure Filbert was content in his stall, I followed up on my offer to walk with Andre back to the house for lunch. Normally employees weren't allowed to eat with guests, but Mrs. Frey always managed to pack some to-go bags for the workers who wanted them. I could grab mine while I dropped him off.

“It has been wonderful to see a familiar face, though. I was starting to feel a little weird, but things seem to be brightening up.”

I wasn't lying—I did feel better and more cheery seeing Andre despite our past blow up. “What are your afternoon chores?”

“Um...” He pulled out the itinerary and looked it over. “A gardening lesson? Taking care of the landscaping.” He checked out the rest of the information on the page. “But it looks like there is a party tonight, some square dancing nonsense. You'd be a square if you didn't go with me.”

Andre gave a gentle huff at his own joke and wrinkled his nose.

I remembered he always thought that he was the funniest person he knew, and I gave him a shrug with a smile.

Employees were allowed to go.

Giving him a nod of agreement, I stopped at the porch. “Alright. Meet me outside the barn when you hear the music start.”

I backed away, biting my lip, turning as I blushed. He grinned, watching me intently, and bowed like a true southern gentleman. Oh boy...what was I getting myself into?

Andre

After a delicious little lunch of roasted ham and cheese sandwich with mustard and Worcestershire crust, I went to the nursery behind the house for the gardening lesson.

I absolutely could not stop thinking about Lilly. I found myself daydreaming during the brief flower-pruning lecture about how good we were together in high school. She was two years younger than me, but we were so in love back then. We dated her entire time in high school, and every person knew that we were an exclusive and reputable couple.

She wasn't the head cheerleader like many expected the quarterback to date, but she was better than that. Lilly was smart. She was kind. She was fun to be around. So many other girls her age hadn't learned those qualities yet, and I valued them in her. I had loved her so much, even if she did have a few nasty quirks here and there, but who didn't? We were young, that was what being young meant—figure out your problems and work on them.

My daydreaming was interrupted by the group moving through the nursery. Mr. Frey had a particular inflection in his voice. “The farm is getting' ready to end the summer growing season, and we'll then move into fall harvest and overwintering crops. In the nursery, we're growing some new flower bushes that, once established, will be transferred to another location on the property.”

Pretty. What did she call them? Hibiscus? Huh, I thought that was a tropical flower.

The group moved outside, and Mr. Frey showed us how to do some work with the beds, weeding, trimming, and cleaning.

We shaped the bushes, and once our teacher was assured we knew what we were doing, we were left to our own devices to fix up the flower beds for the afternoon. At first, it made me bitter. Why should we be doing literal hard labor? At least horseback riding was considered leisurely. Wasn't this why they hired people, so I could relax?

My statement made me suddenly realize that it would mean Lilly would have to be out there in the hot sun doing it. I felt the pain in my back from bending over and realized that she would be the one feeling that pain if that were the case. She must have gotten so many sunburns, so many sore muscles, so many cuts from those damn thorns. If that were the case, well, then it was better for me to do it. I didn't want her to struggle, and I didn't want her friends to struggle, either. Which was a whole new feeling for me, that was for sure.

Lillian

My job for the afternoon was to put things together for the party later that night. I was in the kitchen with Mrs. Frey, helping to take care of some of the vegetables being brought in from harvest elsewhere on the farm. We sat at the table, shucking corn when I thought to ask Mrs. Frey a question. I did consider her a mother-figure after all, and we were very comfortable with one another.

"If you don't mind me asking, how did you meet Mr. Frey?" I questioned gently, not wanting to push boundaries.

I threw a few husks into the bucket to be dumped in the compost later that evening, shaking my hand free of the sticky and irritating hair.

"Oh, ho, ho! What a lovely story. I still catch myself reliving that day. It still makes me shudder." The old woman took my clean ear of corn and added it to a massive wicker basket already partially filled.

"Shudder from excitement?"

"Oh heavens, no, girl, Wilbur was a monstrous little tyke. I think back to my time in primary school, before he showed up, and how peaceful my life was." She gave a dramatic sigh and

pretended to let herself drift into thought. “He was the new kid, parents moved to town after they bought their family farm—this farm—from his uncle’s estate when he passed away. He wasn’t taking too kindly to the change in scenery for a young boy and lashed out.”

A look crossed her face that clearly said she remembered back to another time, but I couldn’t quite determine if it was a fond memory or not.

“He was the class clown. Teachers hated him, and he picked on girls and boys alike, but for whatever reason, it felt like he had his sights aimed right at me.”

Despite her knuckles being knobbed with age, she shucked a corn cob in a single flick of her wrist using a pair of fire tongs. It gave a crisp snap, and the husk and hair flew into the bin in a single pile. She waved the cob around to make her point.

“One afternoon on the bus ride home from school, that little demon boy hopped into the seat behind me and smashed a freshly chewed piece of gum right onto the top of my head. My mother was irate. She had to cut the clump of hair, and I was left with a little sprig of alfalfa for months before it grew out.”

“So how did you two come to be such a wonderful couple if he was such a hideous little kid?” I grimaced, trying to tear a husk away, a kernel popped, splashing me with sweet and sticky corn juice that I wiped off with the back of my hands. The dangers of farming, I supposed.

“Well, that very next day, I trudged myself into school with my little bald spot and my red rubber boots and found him on the playground outside in the rain before classes started. He was by himself since no one bothered with him. Before he could even say anything nasty to me, I shoved him with all my might and the little,” she gave a naughty smile, leaning in to make sure no one heard her while she checked for eavesdroppers, “...bastard fell right into a puddle, straight onto his butt.”

I couldn't help but laugh. Mrs. Frey was always so sweet spoken. Swearing for her was not characteristic, but it gave her all the more charm.

“From that very moment, he behaved himself. Sure, he got into trouble here and there like young men do but never to me. We have been best friends ever since.”

“Wow, that is a story,” I admitted. I hadn't pegged the old woman for such a bruiser in her youth. “And you have been a couple since childhood?”

“You betchya, things were different then. We didn't have your dating apps and all that nonsense. When you found your person, you knew who they were. I knew Wilbur was my 'meant to be' that day on the playground when he got up, soaked as a sack of potatoes, his head hanging like a beaten dog, and he apologized for his behavior. He admitted he was acting out toward me because he thought I was cute. Can you imagine, old Mrs. Frey cute?” She laughed heartily, her chin rising to look at the ceiling as she enjoyed her laughter.

I liked it, too. It was warm and comforting and contagious.

I enjoyed the rest of the afternoon with Mrs. Frey and helped around the kitchen to clean up before taking dishes out to the barn. By the time the sun was setting, and we were putting on the string lights for ambiance, the place had really come together. Huge sweeping fans installed in the ceiling kept the air moving, so it stayed cool and comfortable, and the place was decorated beautifully. Blue gingham covered every surface available. Vanilla candles scented the air ever so subtly over the natural summer smells of fresh hay and warm breezes.

Mr. Frey was battling with a radio they had set up in the corner tuned to some old country music station, but it gave him a bit of trouble. It frizzled and sounded staticky every once in a while, but I thought that gave it a bit of old-school charm. It was comforting. I spotted Anna working on a few final touches along one of the walls.

“Need a hand?”

“Ugh, don’t you just show up in the nick of time?” Anna grunted as she attempted to push a few boxes being used as decorations over a bit more, so they didn’t block a window.

I couldn’t help giggling at her, and we both bent slightly, attempting to push the stack of boxes. Grunting and groaning, neither of our efforts was very successful.

“Yikes, what’s in these, rocks?” I puffed and put my hands on my hips.

She pretended to wipe sweat from her brow. “Well, no.” Anna leaned against the haphazardly stacked boxes. “Bricks?”

“What? Why bricks?”

“They help to keep the stack more steady—less risk of falling over from a bump.”

Anna attempted to stretch out her sore back a bit, but in doing so, knocked one of the boxes just beyond its threshold of “steady.” The top-heavy stack started to lean, and before it had a chance to overturn directly on my ever-so-clumsy friend, I reached up and held it off of her.

“Anna, move, watch out!” I cried, barely stopping the rough wooden box from toppling, but I was only just able to lock my elbows enough once the rest of the bricks flopped to the lower side of the box. I gritted my teeth in the struggle. The radio was too loud, so it seemed as if no one heard our commotion. Anna dove out of the way and was now on the floor, scooting to try to get her feet under her to help me.

Before Anna had a chance to regain herself, the box of bricks instantly felt lighter in my hands. I turned to just be able to see over my shoulder as I felt a warm presence directly behind me. There stood Andre in a white T-shirt and royal-blue jeans, hovering over me, his massive arms were straining at the hems. I could practically hear the threads of the fabric crying out for help. I could only stare up at his perfectly chiseled face as he smiled down at me. Where had he come from?

I HAD THOUGHT about going early to the party, but my New Yorker “fashionably late” sensibility was hard to shake. What if I got there too soon and I had to sit around like a dork? But what if going late seemed haphazard and rude? I huffed and puffed and paced in the tiny area before I left my room, deciding to leave and enjoy the walk over. The sunset was nice, after all. It looked like someone had melted one of my gold watches and threw the metal across the sky.

I passed through the rose gardens that I had helped tend that day and felt a sense of satisfaction at knowing I had assisted in creating that beauty. The plants admittedly did look well-groomed, and as I enjoyed them, I also felt a sense of pride. Maybe that was what Greg was talking about when he said it helped to recenter him. I couldn’t quite understand. Not just yet. However, as I approached the barn, my thoughts were interrupted. I saw the two girls—Lillian and her friend, Anna—struggling with some poorly stacked crates.

Cicadas screamed their nighttime song as I walked over. My pace quickened like lightning to a sprint when I saw Lilly lunge to save her friend and keep the boxes up after Anna had managed to knock them over. My white sneakers beat the dusty golden soil, and before the boxes had a chance to fall or her arms gave out from the weight, I was there. I could feel her back on my chest and stomach as I reached over her to grab what felt like a box filled with literal... rocks? Puzzled, I looked down at Lilly. One of her miraculously blue eyes shone out from the crook in her arm as she looked up at me in shock, and I couldn’t help but give her a warm smile.

“Who ordered a shipment of rocks?” I asked.

At the time, I wasn’t sure how much of a joke I was actually making. The boxes were almost as heavy as my max lift at the gym. A small grunt was all that was needed for me to heft the box onto one of my shoulders and kneel. I placed it neatly on the ground next to the others.

“Bricks!” shouted Anna, finally on her feet and dusting herself off.

“You, girls, okay?” My eyes shifted between the two girls, and I clapped my hands on my jeans to remove some of the dust from the rough cut box and swiped some more off my shoulder.

“We are great *now*. Thanks for saving us!” Anna exclaimed, patting Lillian on the back, turning toward her. “Right, are you okay? Thanks for not letting that crush my head.”

Lillian was staring blankly at me, Anna’s voice giving her a jolt. “Oh, oh yes, I’m fine.”

She blinked wildly, overcompensating, and shook away whatever thought she was lost in.

“Hey, Andre, thank you. I couldn’t have put it back myself. I could barely stop it from falling.”

“Don’t sweat it. That’s what happens when you fill boxes with rocks and pile them up.”

“Bricks.” Both of the girls said in unison.

Lillian reached back, still staring at me, grabbing her friend’s arm. “By the way, this is my friend, Anna. I met her on my first day at the farm, and we have been best friends ever since.”

Anna waved happily. Her hair was tied back in a braid that crowned her head, and some daisies were tucked into the organized knots. We had, of course, met during orientation, but I wanted to be friendly.

“Oh, I didn’t know you knew each other personally,” Anna said. “How fun to have a friend as a guest. I’ll be sure to put in a good word with the DJ.” Anna could sense the atmosphere and started to back away. She even offered Lillian a finger gun or two. “Speaking of DJ, I better check to see if we even have one. My dad isn’t the best with a calculator, let alone any technology more complicated than a radio. See you!”

And with that, Anna turned on her heel and scooted off to help Mr. Frey with some cassette tapes he had stored away from the past decades.

“Cute friend,” I said softly, smiling down at Lillian.

She gave me a breathy chuckle and scratched her head. “Oh yeah, she has a heart of gold and a brain of bubbles—that’s what Mrs. Frey says when Anna forgets to eat. She just likes to keep busy. What are you doing out here? You are...” Lillian paused to look down at her watch. “Well, you are exactly on time. Four minutes late, in fact.”

She hadn’t noticed, but as the brick shenanigan was taking place, many more guests had shown up. Most of the tables were taken, and some people were standing around the cocktail tables, drinks in hand already.

“Well, I did consider being fashionably late, so I guess I got what I wanted. Do you have much more work to do?” I tucked my fingertips into my pockets, my thumbs just dipping into the waistline of my pants.

“Nope. I was just finishing up with Anna. I am all yours for the remainder of the evening.”

Despite the undertone her statement had, she gave me a sheepish smile, and I laughed. Taking her hand, I led us over to the last of the open tables where we sat together and waited for everyone to settle in and the music to start.

Lillian

It didn't take long for Mr. Frey to get the hang of things. It did take a few sticky notes on the buttons he was supposed to press kindly written out by Anna, though. Once that was settled, Anna stepped up on the makeshift stage and tapped a microphone to gain everyone's attention.

“Good evening. I'm so glad you're all here. First, I would like to thank everyone for choosing to spend some time on the farm with all of us this summer. We know this season is busy regardless of where you are, but here is no different.”

There was soft hooting from a man in the back who figured farm work would be a better alternative than mowing the lawn back at home.

“So, I don't want to stall things too much, short and sweet, right? Along either side of the barn, you will find some food for snacking that we will keep full as late as we can tonight. Throughout the night, we will be playing a variety of music. Some of the songs will be square dances, and Mr. and Mrs. Frey will lead the dance to show you all what to do. Don't stress! It's easy, even me with two left feet could figure it out!”

A few people chuckled.

“All right, all right, enjoy your night! Daddy, press the green button!” Anna called back to the old man.

Mr. Frey gave her a thumbs up and happily stamped the big green button with the pad of his thumb. Over the speakers and all through the air, country instrumental floated with such

cheer and vibrancy, it filled my face with a smile. Banjos never sounded how they were described. They were actually a pleasant instrument, especially when accompanied by a violin.

The lights overhead twinkled and sparkled in the ever-darkening night from outside, and Andre and I nervously watched a few groups of older people get up to enjoy the dance floor. It seemed as if most people were nervous about being on stage for others to watch. Never being a person afraid of the center of attention, Andre took my hand, which was laid loosely on the table, and pulled me effortlessly from my seat.

“Come on, let’s go dance. We aren’t some bums, right?” he asked, already headed toward the open floor.

I blushed. I had never been one for making a fuss and certainly never one to draw attention to myself. “Oh, I don’t know, Andre, dancing just isn’t my thing!”

“Nonsense, you don’t know if it’s your thing if you’ve never tried it before—in fact, I can probably name the last moment you danced right down to the minute.” He gave me a devilish grin, which I couldn’t help but smile at and roll my eyes.

He was, of course, talking about his senior prom. We had obviously gone together, and while he was the first quarterback in six years who hadn’t been the prom king, I was relieved I not to be the queen. I didn’t need that attention in my awkward teen years.

Obliging the request, I followed him, and he took us to the center of the dance floor. I shivered with nerves. I was so uncomfortable, but I knew this was his thing. The lights made the entire room feel so much larger than it actually was. Simultaneously, it made the space feel cozy, comfortable, warm, quaint. People in the big city used those lights to try to do the same thing in their small spaces. Some restaurants used them to light up their outdoor seating, but it never had that effect. It was only magnified tenfold when the fireflies started sparkling outside, too. I really couldn’t believe the view from the dance floor, and I loved every inch of it.

Brought back to reality by a hand on my hair, the music was fast-paced and lively. It was bright and cheery, and I couldn't help but move my hips. Andre softly laughed at me and nodded in encouragement. Without words, we copied each other's movements. I would step, he would follow. He would bend, I would curve. As the song went on, the dance floor became quite crowded, and we were forced closer together to enjoy the dance. I did not mind it one bit.

I was able to get a better look at Andre. His face was perfect. He had a jawline so straight I thought he carved it with a knife and ruler. It was lined with a dark beard stubble that was barely showing from the surface of his sepia skin. I reached up as the music churned and wailed with a saxophone, and my fingers traced the line that arched around his cheekbone and gave his face more depth and shadow. I ran a finger across the rough hair, and his hand came up to clasp mine, pressing my palm to his cheek more firmly. It filled my hand perfectly, and his beard tickled my skin, making me wrinkle my nose.

His T-shirt was tight, his broad shoulders pulling at the fabric across his chest. He was sculpted like a *V*, his waist narrow and cinched. His hips lured my other hand in as they rocked back and forth and side to side with the rhythm. Andre had another *V* hidden under his shirt, the tip tucking itself below his waistline, pointing to well...enough said. It was my favorite part of his body.

Or...my second favorite part.

I could still feel his firm muscles when my fingers brushed over them. How had he gotten so strong? Andre had been built in high school. He was always fit and active, but now he felt like an overwhelming powerhouse. He felt like he was surrounding me. His warm eyes watched me as I explored him delicately. When I looked up, I was greeted with that signature crooked smile.

And it made my knees weak.

Andre

THE WAY LILLIAN looked at me was a bit confusing. She had cupped my cheek so gently before moving down, feeling me out through my shirt. What a devil Lilly had become after all those years. She would have never done that before. She was too shy, too reserved. Too secluded in herself. Now she was gazing up at me, her hand on my waist, and I couldn't help but stare.

Her eyes were gorgeous. They always pulled me in, no matter what was happening. I could stare at them all day. Her bronze skin was coupled with ash-blond hair in a perfect contrast that made her look like a summer goddess. Who was I to say that she was anything but that? Maybe I died on my way to the farm, took a turn too quickly on one of those winding back roads, and flipped the car, and I was lying by the side of the road, dead as a doornail, and this was my heaven. I would be happy if this were my heaven.

I reached out to her, as well. She wasn't going to be the only one having a good time. The music slowed to a lulling hum of string instruments. I didn't know those hillbilly songs. It was nice though, the sounds flowed gently in my ears.

The crowd around us paired off. My hand laid softly on Lilly's curved hip. It fit perfectly against the natural curve of my hand, and I tugged her in closer. She gave me a look of surprise as I pulled us close enough that our hips touched. My other hand went around and cupped the back of her neck, my fingers tangling in the braid that washed down her back in loose disarray. When I disturbed her hair, the scent of coconut and vanilla drifted forward. It tickled the inside of my nose in such a way, it brought back memories of her from long since past. Closing my eyes in blissful enjoyment, I hugged her close. Her cheek was warm against my chest, and she pressed herself ever so softly against me. I held her firmly.

That was what I was missing.

I was so sure of it. That was what our prom should have been rather than some social display with no enjoyment. I

wanted to stay in the moment forever, and thankfully, the music lasted long enough. I led our motions, and we rocked back and forth, passing our weight from one foot to another, tracing a circle with our feet.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Lilly whispered to me, her voice almost startling me, but it was so sweet and soft that I could hardly consider it an intrusion.

“I am glad I came, too, Lilly. I wouldn’t want to miss this for the world.” I meant that. I hoped she knew just how much.

The song continued, each note drifting through the air of the barn and out into the field. As we twirled and enjoyed the feeling of being against one another, Lilly looked up at me again. Every time she did, I was taken aback by her beauty. She had matured so well; her features looked as if to have been handmade—everything purposeful and exquisitely designed.

I was overwhelmed with feelings for a woman who I had let go once before. Before I was able to stop himself, I leaned down and brushed my lips against hers. I was greeted with a sharp inhale from my partner. Lilly hesitated, but after the smallest of moments, her mouth fit like a puzzle piece against mine—warm, soft, and sweet. Her lips were perfect and felt like they were just where they belonged. I held the kiss for multiple heartbeats before she pulled away. She blushed scarlet, and the color made her eyes as bright as the sky. I felt my own face warm but lifted a hand and ran the back of one knuckle against her cheek to wipe her embarrassment away. I was rewarded with a smile, and my heart fluttered like a caged canary inside my chest.

Gradually the music sped up and transitioned back to the lively racket it once was. The murmured hush of discussion turned into a rocking roar of laughter and fun. The alcohol had finally set in. All of the pairs assembled on the dance floor now split. We remained the last of the group to do so. Eventually, we turned shoulder to shoulder, and Lillian led us to the barn’s entrance. I hadn’t realized how warm it had become inside. The fresh air was crisp and cool against my skin, and I was very appreciative of it.

“You didn’t have to do that, you know,” she said softly as we exited the barn and took a step onto the pebble path leading around to a grove of fruit trees.

I grabbed her hand as we walked and laced our fingers together. I was amazed at how well her fingers fit between mine.

“I didn’t feel like I had to do anything. I wanted to do it. It felt right,” I said, swallowing nervously. “Wouldn’t you say so?”

Never in my life had I ever been worried about a woman declining my advances.

Usually, the kind of woman I went after was compliant if for no other reason than I had a ton of money. Sometimes they liked my looks, too, and every once in awhile, they enjoyed me as a person. But they always said my appearance helped. Lilly nodded, and strands of her blond hair fell over her shoulder and bounced around her chest.

“It did feel right. It felt surprisingly right...” Her voice trailed off. “You know, the way we ended things... It was a really jagged tear in my heart, Andre. To have you come back here like this and falling so hard for you again...” She pushed those strands of hair back behind her ears. “It’s scary.”

“I am sorry for what I did.”

“Do you even remember?”

“Of course I do. I remember that night like it happened yesterday. It’s like wallpaper on the inside of my eyelids. You didn’t want to be like your family. Even back then, William was already pushing you to make choices that weren’t you. You wanted to be your own person. We got into a fight about that and decided to call it off because of the distance between schools.”

“Right, that’s mostly it. But you told me you weren’t going to be associated with some freeloader who was just into you for your money. I wasn’t allowed to ‘piggyback’ off of you for my popularity anymore. That really hurt my feelings...” Her eyes were glued to the ground. “I ended up going to college

for business to make my family happy, albeit six hours away from home, but I still went.”

I didn't say anything. I wanted to give her the space to talk.

“So, my family thought I was some kind of freeloader, too. I was working so hard to save up money once I came home from school. I started a job in a coffee shop, and it was wonderful getting to work with people. My family, William especially, still despised me. I was the black sheep. You know what is pretty screwed up? I've been gone from home, left nothing but a note to tell them I wouldn't be back, and they never even called me. No one checked in on me. They don't care if I am there or not. Do they care if I'm alive or dead?”

I heard her snuffle. It was obviously something she had been pushing down for some time.

“No one from my life thinks that I have any value. I'm so worthless, in fact, that they can't be bothered to check up on me. But you? Now you of all people show back up after calling me worthless and tell me that they're all wrong. Who am I supposed to believe?” She clenched her fists at her sides, shaking her head as we walked under the twinkling light-laden apple trees.

“You don't have to believe anyone,” I heard himself say.

That weirdly familiar voice in my head was speaking without permission. Where did this come from all of a sudden?

“The only person you have to believe in is yourself. If you feel you have worth, then you do, and you just have to find the right people who see that worth in you. You shouldn't conform to what other people want,” I said, squeezing her hand gently and stroking it with my fingers. I hoped to provide her more comfort.

“That's probably the nicest and wisest thing you've ever said to me.” She sniffled again and gave a breathy laugh. “But you're right. I do value myself a lot, and I feel like I have a lot of worth. That's why I wanted to come here—to prove that I can be who I am and still be successful. I don't have to choose

between being who my family wants me to be or being some homeless bum. I am me, and that's good enough." Lilly gave me a decisive nod, confirming her words to herself.

I smiled and gave her a little nod, as well. "There you go, so don't even let those people drag you down. You are a bright light all on your own, and I am just thankful you've let me enjoy your glow a little bit."

That made her blush, and a smile split my face from ear to ear. By that point, we had reached the end of the orchard. Evening cicadas were roaring as loudly as a full river, and the air smelled like tree bark and freshly tilled earth. It was sweet and savory and comfortable.

"Thank you for talking to me about this," Lilly said, turning to face me.

The light out there was faint and soft, and I could barely make out her face. All I could see was the silhouette of her perfect features-her round nose, her gentle brow, her pointed chin, her white smile. Again, before I had time to react, she had thrown her arms over my shoulders and leaped toward me. Her lips planted themselves firmly on mine, and she kissed me deeply. Her head cocked to the side ever so slightly to accommodate our noses. I loved the feeling of her arms wrapped tightly around my neck, and I held onto her waist, keeping her close until she moved back on her own accord.

"It's late," she whispered to me. "I have to go."

Her smile was so coy I could've imagined it came straight from a fox's face. Her fingers were laced behind her back, and she was taking a step away from me. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

"You will. You will see me anytime you want."

I stood like a statue as she backed away from me. It seemed as if she didn't want to take her eyes off of me as she left. Still, after a few more steps, she waved, turned on her heel, and gave a brisk walk back to the line of tiny homes situated on one edge of the property. Even after she was out of eyesight, I stood in the dark. I stood in the dark with no fear. I

stood in the dark with no worry about what anyone thought of me. The cars, the houses, the money, none of it mattered. I was too busy falling in love again.

Lillian

I made it back to my house quickly, and the entire time, I was scared to look back. What if I did, and Andre was no longer there? What if I turned and went back only to find that his footprints weren't there? What if it was all a dream and he had never come back. What if he had never existed except for in my past, and everything had been a lonely daydream?

I groaned.

“Of course he's real. Don't be so stupid,” I cursed to myself.

I pulled the keys from my pocket and unlocked the front door.

The light switch was flicked on with a soft tap, and I passed through my cool, comfortable little home to the couch. Just as I plopped myself down onto the soft cushions, there was a knock on the door. Who could that possibly be at this hour? Standing, I looked through the peephole into the eye of my best friend.

“Open up, girl, we need to talk!” Anna huffed dramatically, one hand on her hip. She knocked again, a quick rap on the painted door. “I saw you go inside. You need to give me the dirt!”

I opened the door, laughing at my friend. She actually took the time to check on me. Anna was always very thoughtful.

“Come in, sit down, “ I urged.

Anna waltzed by, plopping down on the couch.

“Okay, go. Tell me all about Andre. How do you know him?” She grabbed a pretty pillow decorating the couch and hugged it as she gazed at me inquisitively. I had a feeling things like that didn’t often happen out there on the farm.

“We went to high school together. He was my brother’s best friend, well one of them. We dated for nearly all four years that I was in school, his first year of college, too.” I pulled out a bar stool from under the kitchen counter and sat while talking.

“So he isn’t just some guest. You guys were close before you came to work here? You never mentioned him before. You said you had no family besides the lot you left back in the castle in NYC.”

“No, we weren’t close—not anymore. We got into a fight when it was time for me to choose colleges. A lot of disrespectful words were passed between us, and we grew apart. We hadn’t talked since the night before I left for school.”

I’d always wondered if he regretted that. Did Andre feel bad for the fight that had ended our relationship? Could we have stayed together with so much distance between us? Would he have been as successful if we had stayed together, or would I have held him back?

“Oh, wow, so this is completely by chance?”

“It seems so. Another mutual friend told him about the farm, apparently, he—his friend, not Andre—comes here every once in a while to get himself straightened out and thought it could help Andre with whatever was bothering him.”

“My gosh! You were bothering him!” Anna exclaimed. “He came into our house looking like a rattlesnake that had just gotten stepped on. He looked so mean and hard and venomous I didn’t want anything to do with him. Then, the next day or whatever, I could say he turned over a new leaf, but I think he may have turned into a whole other tree. He

completely changed. That was when you two ran into each other, right?”

I nodded.

“Of course! Wow, what a play of fate if I’d ever seen one!”

“Do you really think that’s what this is?” I probed.

I was always skeptical about fate and destiny and “a bigger plan,” but I couldn’t argue that this seemed a little too convenient.

“I do. This is just so uncanny; what else could it be? You’ll meet up with him tomorrow, right? Why don’t you two talk about how you’ll make it work this time instead of fighting? Sure, there is distance between you now, but you’ve both grown since college. You can make this work. You were obviously made for each other.”

Anna was right. We were almost in the exact same situation as we were back in college. I was four hours away from where he lived.

But bringing up a relationship seemed like too much too soon. Sure, we had both grown up, but we couldn’t have been in two situations more different if we tried. One conversation about something more than a chance meeting could end up the same way it had when we broke up. I shuddered at the thought. That fight had broken my heart deeper than anything else ever had. I didn’t think I could go through that again.

“All right, all right enough of this. You’re standing there, shaking with all the thoughts buzzing through your head. Relax and get some sleep. I brought you this from the party.” She slipped a small bottle of wine out from a bag slung over her shoulder and set it onto the kitchen counter as she made her way to the door. “Enjoy it. I know you aren’t a big drinker but unwind. You need it.”

And with that and a wink, Anna was out the door. I heard my friend walking over the gravel pathway. I waited until the footsteps completely disappeared before getting up to examine the gift. It was a dessert wine filled with sugar and sweetness and bubbles—my favorite. She must have remembered from

our passing conversation. It was still cold, and definitely worth having a glass of.

I took the pink liquid directly to the edge of one of my coffee mugs, a white one with a bumblebee and “nice” written below it in cursive, and took that up to bed along with my phone. As I sat enjoying my drink, I scrolled through a folder that I hadn’t opened in a very long time—a folder with all the pictures I had saved of Andre and me, or just of Andre from when we were a couple.

I found herself flicking through the hundreds of pictures, long after my mug was empty. Eventually, when my eyes could no longer keep themselves open, I fell asleep with my phone on my chest—open to a picture of the two of us, arm in arm, smiling happily at the photographer.

Andre

I couldn't help but feel giddy. Light-hearted and also light-headed, like I was walking on bubbles. Every time I moved, I thought of her and how much potential existed between us again, that maybe it wasn't too late. She was what I wanted.

The next morning I had gotten up early, which was weird for me. I usually loved sleeping in, the soft covers surrounding me, the darkness of blackout shades despite the clock reading noon. It was the peak of luxury to me, but now? Now I wanted to be awake every second of the day. There was always something to do, something to learn, and somewhere to be.

At the end of the day, no matter how long I tried to deny it, I only ever had one goal—Lillian.

She had been on my mind since the day she left for college. I never stopped thinking about her. Even through the money, the success, the women, I still thought of her. I had thought about it for some time. I wondered if I should ask William for his approval. William was still my friend, and I respected him, so I hoped for his blessing, too. The last thing I wanted was for us to return home as lovers and have William kick my ass. Like he could anyway.

I decided not to wait and headed over to the main house. There was a landline in its own little sitting-room since cell signal was basically non-existent. The phone rang a few times.

I hadn't thought about the time. I hadn't bothered to think that he might still be sleeping. After a few minutes of ringing, a groggy and disgruntled voice answered the phone. He

sounded waist-deep in pillows and blankets as lush as the ones I had left back at home.

“What do you want,” growled the voice on the other end.

“Hey, good morning, William. Sorry to bother you. It’s Andre. How are you?”

“Stop wasting my time. What do you want?” he barked.

He was even more fierce than before. Had he always been that way? No, certainly not. I would have remembered that. I couldn’t have tolerated that... Or could I have?

“Oh, sure... Um, so I just wanted to ask you a question. I wanted to see if you would be all right if I—” I was cut off by a massive sigh so loud and directly into the mouthpiece that I couldn’t hear myself talk.

“Get on with it, dude. It’s like, what? 7 am? Spit it out, Jesus Christ.”

“Okay, so I am on vacation, and Lillian is here. Do you care if I date her?” I spat out the sentence.

I couldn’t stop myself. I wanted to ask nicely but had no idea why William was acting that way. I had a hard time believing he had always been such a jackass. Then again, Lillian had said she didn’t speak to him, that he had become obsessive. On the one hand, I wanted to think that time had turned him into that monster.

But on the other hand, something else began to nag at me. I was quite possible he had always been that way. That I just hadn’t noticed in the past because...well, I had been just as callous.

“Lillian? Where the hell are you?” he demanded of me.

I could only stutter for a split second before he interrupted me again.

“Get her home. She left like a coward because she didn’t want to do any hard work. I want her back here, and I want her in this business with the rest of her family.”

“Okay, well, like, hang on one second.” I tried to get a word in edgewise. I could practically feel the foam he was slinging from the corners of his mouth like a rabid dog. “I can’t control her. She’s her own person. She seems really happy here, isn’t that enough?”

“Enough? What’s enough? Having some vagrant freeloader for a sister? No, that’s not enough. What do I care if she’s happy? She isn’t making money. What an embarrassment.”

The whoosh of the fabric came through the line as he threw back his sheets. He must’ve finally dragged himself out of bed. He was grumbling and swearing under his breath, hissing words like a venomous snake.

“Okay, all right. Listen, man, I will do what I can, but I can’t make any promises. She is working here, you know. She is really happy, and I don’t know if I’m ready to be the one to take that from her.”

“Great, then you know what you have to do if you want my blessing.” There was a slam of a door and then silence. He had hung up on me.

We always used to be friends. What the hell?

I took a bit of time for myself that morning to put some distance between that terrible interaction and the rest of my day. I watched the silver sky change and move as the day chased away the night. I needed to reflect. The more I thought about that conversation, the more it bothered me. Had I been like William? Was that why people always treated me a certain way?

People at my company always treated me “quickly,” if that made any sense. I thought they were just efficient, but really, it must have been because they wanted to spend as little time with me as possible. They didn’t want to risk any more exposure to someone like me than they absolutely had to.

I could be different. I could change—I vowed to; that was never who I wanted to be. Besides, Rosemary Farm made it seem so easy to make improvements. Greg was right; I felt

more centered, more like myself. And it was a version of me I hadn't realized I'd been missing.

SUMMER HAD STARTED to pass quicker than either of us had cared to admit. Lillian had spent the days working and doing her usual chores. She took care of the horses, taught guests, and kept the farm beautiful and neat, and she loved every single minute of it.

She especially loved time with her new family. Anna was like an older sister to her, someone who she was able to go to for guidance and help. I made sure to fit myself in wherever I could in her busy schedule. It was evident we both cherished our time together, and we got to know each other even more.

I spent my days honing new skills and crafts and learning more about myself than I thought possible. Who knew that being the same person for over twenty years didn't automatically mean you knew who that person was? I was proud to learn something new every single day.

My favorite thing—which surprised me—had to be the lessons in home decorating that Mrs. Frey gave. I had always appreciated beautiful things, but creating it myself gave me even more joy.

One morning, I made a wreath out of pine boughs and dried golden grasses from one of the unplanted fields. An afternoon or so later, I got the hang of weaving baskets and picture frames from rushes—an ancient practice used for both practical and decorative purposes.

I also enjoyed going out in the afternoon with Mr. Frey, who would take groups fishing. It was something his father had done with him as a child, and his grandfather and great grandfather for generations. My father had never bothered to spend much time with me.

During the golden hours, while we watched dragonflies skim the water and bass jump to catch them, I asked him a question. “Mr. Frey, how long has your family been in the farming business?”

We sat next to one another on the creek bank.

His bushy white eyebrows rose as he thought. “Well... If I had to be honest, I couldn’t give you an exact date, but I know my great grandfather came overseas from Britain, vowed to be the most prosperous farmer in the colonies, and settled down with my great grandmother only a few miles from here. Ever since then, farming has been in my blood.”

“Could you see yourself doing anything different?” I asked, flicking my fishing rod ever so gently to create a point of interest for any curious fish.

Another long pause hovered between us.

“No, I really don’t think I could.” He took a deep breath, looked over at me with his heavily wrinkled face, and gave me a long-toothed smile. “You never think you can be happy with less until that’s what you have. That’s one of the reasons Rosemary Farm is so popular with city folk. The temptation to uptake the technology, the media, the entertainment doesn’t exist. Here, there is none of that. Just simplicity.”

I could get behind that. The simplicity was comforting. I had been nervous that first night, just like most. How would I sleep without the TV on? How would I eat without something to watch and entertain me?

It wasn’t long until I slept with the sounds of birds and bugs lulling me into the deepest slumber I had ever experienced. Dinnertime entertainment consisted of people, not shows. Conversation. Quality time. Priceless interactions with others. It warmed my soul—it reminded me I had one.

“I can agree with that,” I said to the old man and sat back in my place with a smile on my face. Before long, the tip of my fishing rod bounced and bobbed over the water, and I gave it a quick flick and then began to reel in when the fish gave me just enough slack to do so.

Before long, I had a beautiful rainbow trout in my hands, and Mr. Frey was taking a picture. He gave me the polaroid photo, and I didn’t think I had ever seen myself smile so broadly. No billboard had that picture of me, not with a twig in

my hair and my shirt wrinkled and wet. Not with fish slime on my hands and sunburn on my cheeks. That was my moment, my life, and I cherished it.

At night, or early evenings, when Lillian had finished for the day, we would get together to relax and talk about stuff we had done that day. It was like a bookmark between days that allowed us to recap and de-stress if needed. Sometimes we would go back to Lilly's house if she invited me. I thought the tiny houses were luxurious despite their sizes. It was cozy, especially as I had watched Lillian's plant collection grow while I was there. They added a softness to her space that just made it feel more like home.

The Freys were incredibly kind to provide such luxurious housing to their workers, and Lilly often exclaimed how proud she was of her place.

Anna would gift her some pots of seeds now and again, or maybe a vine of something or another, and somehow Lilly would coddle it and bring it to life, turning something that wasn't any more than a pebble into a string or sprig of greenery. I was always a little jealous, but more than not, I was impressed by her. She could take nothing and put life in it, just like she did with me.

Other nights we would have dinner on the beautiful wraparound porch together. Workers often weren't allowed to eat with guests in the evening, but that didn't mean that Mrs. Frey didn't cook food for them. She always had a pot boiling on the stove or a tray of something baking in the oven that everyone was free to indulge in throughout the day and night.

The lanterns on the porch, coupled with the carefully tended flowers, made our meals seem so romantic. A restaurant in the city, no matter how secluded, could never match the level of intimacy we shared on the porch. Crickets chirped, the breeze whispered, and Lillian laughed at my bad jokes.

"All right, okay, listen to this one," I would tell her with a French fry hanging out of my mouth.

She would already be giggling, pleading with me not to torture her through another one, but I couldn't help myself. I loved making her laugh even if the jokes were terrible.

“What did Mrs. Duck say when she bought a new tube of lipstick?” I waggled my eyebrows at her, my chin down as I challenged her to give me an answer.

“Oh, God, no way.” She cackled, almost spilling her iced tea. “Um... I don't know.”

She shied away, not wanting to risk a wrong answer.

“Put it on my bill. Ha-ha.” I gave her a snap of my fingers and stole a pickle from her plate, one that was sitting next to her burger. “Come on, Lilly. You knew that one.”

“Did not. But they are too cute.”

We spent hours and hours laughing on that porch together, and I often wondered if that was what Mr. and Mrs. Frey could be caught doing when no one was looking. Had they been sweet on each other like that before the farm was open? Somehow throughout my time there, they had become the epitome of what I wanted my relationship with Lillian to mirror—they were devoted to each other, and it showed.

Another one of my favorite nights happened to be the evening that Lillian was done with work early. Both of us, along with Anna, had gone down to the creek at the base of the farm's valley to cool off. It had been almost a hundred degrees that day, and everyone was thankful for the opportunity to swim in the chilly water. Many of the guests and workers came with us that afternoon—it was like a secret farm-wide party.

Lillian was wearing a white and copper bikini. She looked gorgeous, striking. I gawked at her body when she came out of her little lavender house, even if she was wearing a coverup. She had become so fit and shapely over the summer from all the hard work and hearty food. Her skin had tanned to a golden cinnamon color—she must have burned more than tanned at the beginning of it all because there was a slight hint

of pink that lingered under her glow. I couldn't blame her for her fair complexion.

Lillian made it obvious she enjoyed me too. Her eyes never stopped roaming me, and I never wanted them to. My swim trunks hung on the corners my hips, accentuating the valleys my muscles had chiseled into my skin. My muscles were grown in a gym, but with the hard work I had been doing out on the farm, they were developing even more—stronger, bigger to be functional, and more helpful in my everyday activities. There was no such thing as a “glamour muscle” on me anymore. My natural tawny skin tone had always made Lilly's heart flutter, especially when coupled with my warm eyes and dark hair. I could practically see her swoon out of my peripherals when she thought I wasn't looking.

Anna led us all down to the creek and showed us how to tie off some floats to branches overhanging the water. I had chosen a giant pizza slice to lay on. Anna had a flamingo with an obnoxious head sticking up, and Lillian had a unicorn that she could ride.

We anchored off like Anna had shown us, and it allowed our rafts to center in the middle of the stream while staying right in the path of the sun. The heat of the sun's glow countered the crisp water that splashed on us—or was splashed onto others by me more than likely. Let's not lie; I was making trouble that evening. Lillian let her floaty bounce next to mine so we could be closer.

At one point, I looked over, and she had fallen asleep, leaning forward onto the head of the horse so the sun could gently stroke her back. She must have always been exhausted with all the hard work she did.

We must have stayed there until midnight. Even more guests had come down, too, so it was more like a barbecue than anything else. Someone had made a campfire on the beach of the creek, and the crowd set up chairs around it. The smell of s'mores wafted around us and made our stomachs growl with the scent of marshmallow and chocolate.

Once the air became too cold to stay in the water anymore, we shivered our way over to the beach and joined the party. Anna had smuggled away Mr. Frey's battery-operated radio, and the music brought the party to life.

Anna and Lilly challenged one another to a s'mores eating contest. And by the end of the night, I was pretty sure Anna had won after fourteen of them were devoured. Lilly could barely make it past nine. Who could blame her? I couldn't tolerate all that sugar. Though I did have quite a few beers.

All in all, Lillian and I had agreed that the night was perfect, and we had even snuck downstream to enjoy a quick kiss under the starlight on the rocky bank. I loved the way her cheeks glowed with blush, and Lillian commented on how my eyes sparkled when I looked at her. We were entwined heart and soul and agreed we wouldn't have it any other way.

That was when it dawned on me, and I finally agreed with what Mr. Frey had said during one of our fishing trips. It had made sense then, but now I actually felt it—simplicity was key. I had everything that I needed right there. No extra technology. No stressful work. No miserably suffocating city.

All I needed was Lilly and some fresh air.

Lillian

Morning must have been my favorite time of day at Rosemary Farm. Sure, every day was nice, and the hustle and bustle of business was comforting, but there was something about the silence of morning in the country that soothed my soul when I didn't even know I needed it.

The birds weren't singing yet. The sun wasn't even over the crest of the mountain in the east. The only light that the farm was receiving was being filtered through the clouds from the other edge of the world as everything turned closer to daytime. It felt like a secret land, only made for me to experience, and I enjoyed the infrequent time that I had it.

The air was cool and crisp. I could smell the scent of fall just barely at the tip of an inhalation. It was spicy and let me know what was just beyond. I enjoyed the hint at what was coming in the next chapter of life but also the stagnation that was long summer days.

Everything seemed perfect. In the city, everything always smelled the same. It was drab and gray and often literally quite toxic. In the summer, it was the same scent but hot; in the winter, it was the same scent but cold. There was never any change because nothing in the city ever shifted despite the massive amount of people. Sure, winter came and went, and spring came through, but when there was no "nature" to experience, the seasonal changes were just inconveniences.

I was out at the barn, as I usually was before the rest of the world woke up. Blotches and I were spending some quality

time together before she was expected to get to work just like I was. She was due out in the field to lead around the younger saddle training horses who would be integrated into riding programs the next year. I had already finished brushing her glossy snow and chocolate coat and had moved on to her crystal-white mane.

I loved going through and making sure there wasn't a single knot in her hair. When it was perfect, it moved like a single sheet, rippled with each step she took, and she looked glorious. Not to say she didn't always look great, but she cleaned up even more than I had thought possible.

Blotches was busy eating her breakfast. We stood quietly in her stall, and she munched loudly on molasses oats. I was doing one last pass through her mane when I noticed her ears perk up, and she removed her snout from her bucket, a few oats falling off into the hay around her hooves.

I turned to look behind me, out the entrance of her stall. My mouth dropped open, finding Andre standing there, holding a beautiful bouquet of flowers in front of his face. It was a bouquet from the field on the farm rather than from the gardens that everyone tended. They looked rustic and dry and gorgeous for the season.

Right in the middle of the arrangement was a giant sunflower, almost as big as my face. The leaves and blades of grass added to the bunch to fill it out rustled as Andre lowered it to give me a smile.

“Good morning. I picked a sunflower because that was on your corsage at prom...” His voice was sheepish and quiet. “I know they're your favorite.”

My heart swelled. I knew he had grown as a person while he was at the farm. I could see it in everything he did. I enjoyed watching him learn new things about himself, but I didn't have any idea that Andre could ever be so thoughtful and sweet. My eyes burned with tears, happy tears, but tears, nonetheless.

“Thank you so much.” I choked out, not intending to do so. I shook my head, not believing that he had put so much

thought into a bouquet. “When did you get so good with flowers?”

I took them from him and gave them a deep sniff. The late-season pollen tickled my nose.

“I went to every flower forming class Mrs. Frey held. I learned how to keep them fresh and happy until delivery and how to make them look perfect around your target piece. I have wanted to make this for you for a while, but I was nervous.”

Andre? Nervous? He really wasn't the person I thought he was anymore. He had never been nervous about anything for as long as I could remember—whatever he wanted to do, he did it or got it or made it happen.

“I love it. These are so beautiful.” My heart filled, and as I was turning to place the bouquet in a hook on Blotches's stall, I felt his hand on my hip. It was so soft, such a delicate feeling, but it was there.

“I'm glad you like it.” His voice was grumbly and as smooth as satin.

I had no idea he had approached me so quickly and had gotten so close. Andre's breath was on the back of my ear, and my hair tickled my skin, blowing as he spoke.

My skin prickled, and I turned to face him, looking up into his chestnut-brown eyes. “Andre, why are you out here so early? No one else is up yet.”

His fingers tightened ever so slightly on my hip, caressing the shape of my pelvic bone under my jeans. His thumb stroked the soft cotton of my blouse. “That's why. I thought it might be nice to have some time alone.”

His nose grazed against my forehead, nuzzling me ever so softly. His lips barely touched my skin, but I could feel the heat of him against me, nonetheless.

My heart started pounding in my throat. I had wished our time could be a little more private. The time at the creek was terrific, but with people all over the place, we had no space for ourselves. When Andre would come over to my house in the

evening, there was an awkwardness that, while not impeding a friendship, was still there. Was it heavy sexual tension that neither of us was ready to address?

His other hand found its way to the back of my neck. Andre's fingers snaked their way through the tendrils of hair that had freed themselves from my ponytail during Blotches's grooming session. His grip on me was firm, not threatening, but strong. His palms were so warm, and I could feel that heat flow down my back.

"I'm glad you came... I've been thinking about you." I was barely able to choke out words through my emotions.

His thumb rubbed just behind my ear, his rough skin ever so gentle. My cheeks reddened, and I felt them betray me with heat.

He smiled down at me knowingly. "I've been thinking about you, working so hard out here all day long." He angled my chin up to look at him directly. "You must be tired."

I ever so slightly dampened my lips as I looked up at him. "I'm not tired as long as you're around. You give me a reason to be excited."

One of my hands hung onto his wrist, the one that was behind my neck, and I gripped him gently.

Andre lowered his face to me, his lips were only a hair's width away from my own, and his breath swirled just under my nose. His nose brushed against mine, and my lips quivered in want. He must have felt it because, with just the smallest of movements, he brought our mouths together. Immediately a heat exploded within me that made me reach out to him with passion and need, my arms wrapping tightly around his neck, not letting him back away.

I heard him chuckle between kisses, his laugh filling my heart with joy and his body filling me with something else. I clung to him, and he took me in. Andre hugged me close, and with his grip, he deepened our kiss.

He eased me into the barn stall. Blotches fussed nervously with having us so near to her, but it didn't deter Andre. He

pressed me firmly against the rough wood, and with a shift of his grip, he lifted me to sit on the edge of the stall. I was now taller than him, and I leaned forward to meet his affection. He was up to about my belly button, and he hugged himself close between my knees. I kept him clamped near me.

With ease, his fingers undid the button on my jeans with a tired pop from the tension of leaning forward. Before I had a chance to recognize what was happening, he also had my zipper down. I gasped and leaned away from him for a moment to look down at his coy expression, an eyebrow raised.

I leaned over to allow him to pull one side of my jeans down, and then the other, popping the waistband over my butt. The barn wood was rough on my skin. He took my pants down in a single fluid motion after that, and I kicked them free from my feet after he pulled off my boots, flinging them into the corner of Blotches's stall.

He returned to the spot between my thighs. His hands gripped them tightly near my torso, his thumbs dipping ever so carefully just under the hem of my panties. When he freed his lips from me again, he then brought his face between my legs and hooked the crotch of my panties with a thumb to pull them away, exposing me entirely to him.

Andre brought his lips to mine, my heat radiating, expressing my deepest want. I cried out when I felt him kiss me, when I felt his tongue lap at my folds. He pressed my legs farther apart, and I leaned back, locking my arms on the stall to allow him greater access to my pulsing mound.

His tongue dipped into me without warning, and I clenched down on him tightly with a peep of surprise. Andre retracted and brought his attention to my clit, swirling and circling it and flicking it with just the tip of his tongue, occasionally dipping back into my wetness.

I could barely contain myself with what he was doing with his mouth. I bucked my hips against his face, encouraging him further. His tongue and lips and fingers were everywhere. I couldn't pinpoint what felt best because it all felt so good. He

sucked and licked, while his free thumb dipped into me, stretching me slightly while he played my body like an instrument.

It didn't take long for Andre's ministrations to send me spiraling; I couldn't help myself. An orgasm flowed over me so steadily that I lurched back and forth, wave after wave of heat and static passing through me. I clenched my knees around his head, pleading with him not to stop. Thank God he didn't.

When I finally quit shaking, my body was still in the throes of after-climax contractions. I slid down from my perch, and my legs were as weak as Jell-O. My inner thighs were damp and sticky from both his saliva and my juices. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand as he looked down at me with a smile.

I pushed him as hard as I could. Blotches was absolutely fidgety with people in her stall, so I sent Andre into the one across the hall of the stable. My thighs shook, bare in the cold air, and my skin prickled harshly in response.

He grunted at my force, and he laughed. "I didn't expect you to be so strong." He huffed down at me, though I didn't allow him much time to talk.

I pressed my lips to Andre's again. My flavor lingered on him and gave his breath a sweet tinge.

The stallion in that stall was also not happy about having any visitors. He pawed at the stall side to make his discomfort known. I also no longer wanted to wait and didn't want to play games with him. I needed Andre inside of me. My want was so deep and primal that I couldn't control myself.

I loosened my shirt as I felt his hands slide up my back. With a single hand, only a few fingers, and a quick twist, Andre had loosened the back clasp of my bra, and my breasts relaxed just slightly. Their weight was left to hang against my skin. I hadn't realized how erect my nipples were until they brushed against the pad of the bra and shot a tingle down my spine.

Andre directed me out of the second occupied stall and over to the haystack, where we stored the soft, sweet grass for the horses to eat, so it didn't get wet. He picked me up by my waist and brought me over to the delicately laid bed, and he tossed me into it. I landed softly onto the yellow fluff, and I spread both my arms and legs—inviting him to me.

I could see his manhood straining against his pants. He seemed so uncomfortable as he dropped to his knees. I undid his waistband as quickly as I could. As soon as I did, his member pressed against his boxers.

He gave his waist a little shimmy, and he dropped his pants off of him, his boxers the only thing keeping him restrained. Andre reached forward and lifted my shirt off of me, throwing it to the side. The barn was now scattered with my clothing, which I felt was unfair. In an effort to even the playing field, I motioned for him to remove his shirt as well, which he did without hesitation.

His body was beautiful. He was so chiseled and shapely over every inch of his body. Each movement made his muscles flex and bulge. He looked as if he could carry me away in his arms. I panted as I watched him stretch, my fingers running over his beautifully glazed abs.

He reached forward and grabbed my bra; I lowered my shoulders and allowed him to pull it free. My breasts bounced from their restraints, and he cupped them gently. Leaning forward, his lips latched around my left nipple and sucked it sharply. I cried out again. My back arched, and he buried his face even more firmly into my breasts, the soft flesh rising around his cheeks.

His fingers gently massaged while he aligned his length between my swollen pink lips to slide along and caress my clit. As he ground against me, I could feel his boxers slide down, fully exposing his length. He continued to toy with my still-sensitive area and circle my entrance with his head.

He pressed my breasts together and kissed both mounds deeply, bringing the flesh into his mouth to suckle, leaving blooming, purple love marks behind. While he was encircling

my right nipple with his tongue, his head pressed against my tight entrance. He moved his face to my throat and gave the softest of whispers.

“Take a deep breath,” he hushed, his arms looping under my lower back, forcing me to arch upward, fully aligning me to the angle of him. Before I had a chance to follow his directions, his hips thrust sharply forward and pierced into me, his full-length gliding as deeply as it could go into my body aided by the lubrication he had coaxed from me prior.

I gasped; the pressure on my cervix was deep and pleasurable. It felt as if he were pressing up into my belly. Andre’s balls pressed against my cheeks firmly, and as he withdrew, he pulled the deepest of heats out of me as well.

His head popped free of me, and before I had a moment to regain my composure, he thrust fully into me again, withdrawing halfway and submerging again. Each entrance caused my breasts to bounce rhythmically, and he occasionally caught one in his mouth before trapping my lips. He kept this rhythm up—pop and thrust, pop and thrust, and the feeling of having him enter and leave me was luxuriously teasing, especially when paired with the feeling of complete fullness.

Gradually his speed began to increase, but he made sure to use his full length regardless. While he was as deep as I wanted him, I wanted to make sure he hit that perfect spot. I put gentle pressure on his chest, and he stopped at my command, keeping just his head within me. I could feel the smallest of dribbles slipping from him; the beads of heat were incredibly identifiable.

“You better make this last.” I gave him a curt smile and rolled over, stretching my leg to keep him in me as I took to my knees. I pressed my breasts into the hay and used an armful of it to support my chin. With my ass high in the air, I looked over my shoulder at him, wagging my rear end gently, threatening to knock him free of me if he didn’t continue.

Andre’s hands hooked into my hips between my legs and belly, and I felt him mount me entirely, ever so slightly

bending over me to maximize the angle he needed to fully use my body.

He was gentle at first, going slow to make sure he knew just how deep he could go without causing me pain or discomfort. Each thrust in, he grabbed me back and pulled me into him. It was luxurious. I felt filled. He used his knees to spread mine even farther for him, and he pressed my back down, arching me even more so.

It was then he started. He moved so smoothly. Each thrust came like a whirlwind, one right after the other, more quickly than I could imagine. His head pressed against my G-spot perfectly with each stroke, and it made me erupt in feeling. I whimpered in lust, my thighs quaking at each insertion. I looked over my shoulder to see him, head down, concentrating on pleasing me. Each of his muscles worked on exciting my body.

I was dripping, and his grip tightened even more.

His nails dug ever so gently into my flesh. “Lilly, I’m close...” he grunted, and I could feel him hesitate on his actions, what he would do with his result.

I could feel his hot pre-cum priming me for the real delivery. I knew I wanted it. I reached back and clasped one of his hands on my hip, which earned an astonishing glance. He never stopped his rhythm. He knew what I wanted. Andre let his head fall back, and he fucked me so ferociously that I gasped at every pump. His speed matched with his strength, and the power pushed me over the edge. I screamed out in another bout of pleasure, my body convulsing around him, stroking him, coaxing his gift from him.

I drenched him even more, and a moment after my orgasm, I heard him growl, felt his thighs clench. Then I felt it—the spray of heat deep inside my chamber, filling me up, being pushed from me as he continued to thrust and drip down my womanhood and into the hay. I felt it all; the heat was soul penetrating.

He let his weight rest on me, still buried inside me, filled with his seed. I felt his hot, sweaty body panting, his stomach

heaving over me. I, too, was panting. Both orgasms had taken so much out of me that I couldn't think straight. I was overcome with the buzzing sensation of satisfaction.

"You all right?" he asked me, his voice soft and gentle and careful.

His hand stroke the length of my back, and ever so carefully, he freed himself from my quaking form. Andre's seed leaked from me, and as I erected myself on my knees and dusted my hands free of the hay, I emptied into the stall. It caused me to blush even more.

"Oh yes, perfectly all right." I laughed ever so breathlessly, and he came down to join me in the hay.

His arms wrapped gently around me, encompassing me in his strength. Andre pulled me into him, and together we lay in the warm hay, my eyes drifting closed with the sound of birdsong just etching itself into the day.

Andre

Jesus Christ. This woman was going to break me. I lay next to her in the hay, and the sticky, sweet, golden grass stuck to every inch of me. Its dusty air tickled my nose and eyes, but I was still comfortable. I held her tightly in my arms, not wanting to let her go.

Time stood still as we lay there. The sun didn't seem to rise any more than it already had, and birds were only just now waking up. No one from the farm was moving yet, and it created an atmosphere of complete and utter peace. This was what I had come here for.

"That was pretty great," I said, feeling kind of stupid after opening my mouth, but thankfully she smiled.

Lilly's rosy-red lips barely curved up at the edges. Her eyes were closed. "It was. It was pretty great. A lot better than I remember it ever being, that's for sure."

That made me laugh. She was right, a lot had changed from both of us over the years, and I bet this might have changed the most. She was so perfectly womanly; her body seemed to be sculpted from soft river clay. She was the perfect female from top to bottom.

We lay there for what seemed like forever. I didn't want the moment to end. I felt that now was the best time to ask Lilly my question when she was as deeply in love with me as she could get. This was the least risky time to do it, but every time the words were just on the edge of my lips, I couldn't do it. I couldn't ruin this moment.

“You seem like you want to say something. I keep seeing you puff your cheeks. What’s up?”

I grumbled. Damn. How did she always know what I was thinking? Were we really such a match made by the universe that she was inside my head? I needed time. I needed to word it correctly. I stood up and began collecting our clothing.

“Well, yeah, you know. I’ve meant to ask you something,” I blundered. I didn’t bother with my boxers and shoved them into the pocket of my jeans once I pulled them up and fastened them tightly, cinching the belt around my waist.

“Oh, yeah? What?”

I handed Lilly her undergarments and shirt. Her pants were still in Blotches’ stall, where I had tossed them. Phew, thank goodness, that put some distance between us while I thought. Unfortunately, it wasn’t enough.

“Um... So... Well...” I continued to stutter as I handed her the last of her things, and she was putting on her clothing.

She gave me a side-eye glance. “You are being really weird. What’s going on?”

“Okay, okay, fine.” I let out a heavy sigh and ran my hand through my hair. “I was on the phone with William. I wanted to make sure I was doing the right thing...” the words were tumbling out of my mouth. “I wanted to make sure your family was all right with us being together again, you know, after everything happened...” I felt my face whiten.

“You what? You knew I didn’t want anything to do with my family. Why would you go out of your way to involve them?”

“I don’t know, Lilly. I just thought it was what was right. You know, men always ask the father’s permission to be with his daughter, take his ‘little girl’ away. Well, I know your dad isn’t really in the picture, but I’m close to William, and I thought you were, too, so I wanted to make sure he was okay with it and—”

“Oh my God, did you tell him where I am?” Her voice was loud and quick. She was obviously very upset.

“No, no, I just told him I’m on vacation. I told him you were working where I was staying, that’s all. I just wanted to ___”

“Did he ask about me? Did he say Mom was worried about me?”

I paused. Should I admit how Will really was to me? Surely she would have to know just how terrible he was. She had left after all. She had to have left for a reason.

“No. No one was asking about you.” My voice was heavy as I saw her face drop, and she lost a significant amount of glow from her eyes. “I’m sorry, Lilly, I only wanted to do the right thing.”

“Did you get his blessing?” she asked with a harsh tone. She was displeased by all of this. She seemed hurt, and her displeasure sliced at my heart.

I sighed. I had nothing good to say to her. “Sort of. He gave me a condition that I have to follow if I am to gain your family’s blessing.”

We were both standing in the back of the barn. The bird’s songs were getting much louder now, and we could hear the whisper of voices in the distance as the farmhouse was starting to wake up.

“Well?”

“I have to bring you home with me if I want to gain William’s blessing to be with you.”

She scoffed heavily. “Really? And you can’t be stupid enough to listen to that nonsense.” Lilly crossed her arms tightly in front of her; her eyes were like pinpricks boring into me with—I really hoped I was wrong—hate. She was so filled with hate that I didn’t know what to do anymore.

“I-I... Lilly, I have a good company back home. We would be rich. You wouldn’t have to work in your family’s business if you didn’t want to. You’d just have to come back with me. We could put on a front to make them happy.” I tried my best, but I was floundering.

She glared at me, this time her hate wasn't hidden. "I told you why I left. They were terrible to me. The life they expect me to live isn't the one I want. Are you just like them? You haven't actually changed, have you?" She sneered as if she had just found out a secret; if only she knew how wrong she was.

"No, Lilly, I promise I just want what's best. I'm just trying to do what's right."

"Well, what's right isn't me, apparently. I'm not going back. My life is here, and I love it. I've never been happier. You can sell your business and come to work on the farm if you actually love me." She was intentionally acting unreasonably. She wanted to give me an impossible ultimatum so she could say I was the one who had failed. That was her MO. Had she not changed, either?

I rubbed the back of my head. I had no idea what to say to her at that point. "You know I can't do that, Lilly. My business is everything. Without it, I wouldn't have a penny to my name. We haven't been running long enough for me to retire. That's completely unreasonable."

"Then, we are both being unreasonable. At least you can get out." Now she was standing her ground, and she clenched her jaw and tightened her arms across herself. She meant to remain firm, and there was nothing I could do about it.

"Is that what you want? After everything so far, you really just want me to walk away?"

"Yes, please. Walk away *again*. Show me just how wrong I was about you." She was hurting her own feelings. Her eyes were reddening, and I could see them fill with tears.

"If you want me to leave, then that's what I'll do."

"Get out."

I was absolutely astonished. That wasn't how I meant for any part of the conversation to go. I stuttered, flummoxed; eventually, my mouth just hung agape. Was Lilly really so clueless? Was I really so evil? Maybe I actually hadn't changed.

She was still glaring at me. I could feel her eyes boring into my skin, leaving welts and boils wherever they landed. My flesh singed with her hate and smoked from the heat of her anger. It was all wrong. I had made such a massive mistake.

We were both dressed, and people were nearing the barn. I flapped one last piece of straw out of my hair and gave her a final glance over my shoulder. If she wanted me to leave, fine; I would leave, but that wouldn't be it. She wasn't going to remember me as someone who had abandoned her. I had done it once to her, never again.

I left the barn. I trotted away from where I knew she felt safest and strongest, and I went back to my room. The door slammed behind me as I quickly shoved my belongings into my bags. I sat in my room for hours. What could I have done to make that right? I had done so much damage in a single moment. How could I have been so dumb?

The entire day had passed as I made my plans. I watched the sun sweep across the sky in a massive wave. When it began to bleed and pour blood through the clouds, I knew what I had to do. I grabbed my bags and stormed from the house. Mrs. Frey was downstairs and attempted to see me out, calm my rage, but I didn't need that. I needed that determination because never in my life had my path been more clear.

I got to my car. Pollen had built up on it from being parked outside for a month. The dust flew off in a yellow cloud as I slammed the trunk, and then I hopped behind the wheel. The engine roared to life despite its vacation, and I backed up, making a three-point turn, leaving the property with another spray of gravel just as I had come.

I knew what I had to do.

Lillian

I watched him leave. Again. He was gone in a heartbeat. He didn't even bother to say anything, not that I wanted him to. What more could he say that he hadn't already? "I don't respect your dumb ideas?" That was about the last thing he left unmentioned.

My heart began to break. It was a painful, shredding feeling that no matter how hard I tried to will away, it wouldn't stop. I bet if I had listened closely enough, I could hear it shattering like glass, or perhaps like a foot stepping onto the snow with a crisp covering of ice. I wish I could only be so cold.

I cried as I stood there. God, how I wished I didn't, though. I didn't want to seem so weak. I watched his broad back run back to the house like the coward he was. How could I have been so stupid? Tears rolled down my cheeks, and I slipped into Blotches's stall to hide from whoever was coming; I could hear people, workers, but I couldn't yet see them, thankfully. I clenched my fists tightly and tried to stop my tears, but no matter how hard I tried, I could not. I buried my head in her perfect mane, messing it up with my sadness. I suppose I was just good at ruining everything.

I had just given him everything. It was amazing, sure, but it had only left me with a broken heart. Now, what did I have to show for giving him the most of me? Nothing. I had a broken heart for the second time in my life. I should have known people never change. He was just as selfish as Will.

Their whole stupid friend group was like that, and they would never change.

I should have learned my lesson the first time. I should have known that no matter how much I willed it, I couldn't change the fate of what was supposed to happen. I thought maybe because he had put so much effort into the things the farm offered that perhaps my memories of us were...my imagination? A bad dream? I guessed this was how some people got trapped in the cycle of a toxic relationship.

Once the coast was clear, hours later, I ran back to my home and closed the door quietly behind me. I didn't want any of my neighbors to hear that I was back, or they might come over to offer me a pitcher of tea or some sweet they had made with something from the farm. I didn't need any kindness. I needed pity, my own, preferably. I certainly didn't need any witnesses to my sorrow.

I slid down the door when I was finally inside, landing sharply on my butt on the foot mat, and I hugged my knees. My face was buried perfectly in my arms, and I sobbed so deeply I thought I might break a rib. I shuddered with my sadness. Dark spots of tears formed on my lap, and my teeth clenched so tightly while I cried, I risked cracking a tooth.

I sat there for what felt like hours. I could feel the temperature rise in the little home despite the shade from the massive trees outside. Finally, I could no longer keep myself balled up anymore. My cheeks were hot and red from crying and the heat of my own breath trapped in my arms. I was absolutely miserable.

I put my head back, knocking it with a loud thump off of the steel door. I didn't immediately know that it hurt. My consternation was absolutely on my heart that felt like it was in a battle to leap from my own chest. My palms were flat on the ground, and I spread my legs, in an attempt to both cool myself and release all of my pent up energy. I sniffled heavily and groaned. My emotions were so heavy and toxic; I couldn't stand it.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I both heard and felt a knock coming from the other side. I bet I flew a foot away from the door. With dread in me, I tried to guess who it could be, and why were they bothering me? Turning around slowly, I looked up at the window to find a face peering in. It wasn't immediately distinguishable through the tears or the frosted glass, but after they called out, I knew exactly who it was.

"Lilly, I know you're in there..." Anna's voice came through the door softly and sweetly. She knew something was up. Had she seen us in the barn?

"I'm busy right now. Can we talk later?"

I was so hurt, I felt as if I were bleeding out of every pore physically possible. I really didn't know if I was capable of holding a conversation. Or maybe she was mad I had skipped out on my work for the day. I felt an instant pang of fear deep in my gut, which didn't sit well with anything else.

"I know you're not busy, Lilly. I could hear you crying before I even stepped onto your porch." She patted softly on the door again. "Please let's talk." She sounded sincere.

Why did I doubt her? Had Andre broken my trust so severely that I didn't even trust my best friend?

The lock clicked as I reached up and turned the deadbolt. Anna tried to open the door, but I was still a lump on the floor, and I grunted as she knocked it into me.

"Oh my gosh, you goof, are you a girl or a doorstep?" Anna reached out and practically picked me up by my underarms. "You are going to hurt yourself, come over here now, one step at a time, right this way..."

Anna led me like a hurt lamb over to my couch, where she set me gently.

My legs didn't feel like they would work—maybe it was from the emotion, maybe I had cut the circulation off long enough that they would pop off all by themselves and walk away from me, too. This thought brought on a whole new wave of tears that washed like a sheet down my face.

“Oh, sweetheart, what happened?” she cooed gently. She brought out a soft handkerchief and wiped my cheeks ever so gently. She even patted the tip of my nose before placing the cloth in my hand for my use. “This type of pain only comes from one thing, girl. Let me know what happened but in your time. Let me get some snacks.”

Anna excused herself from the couch, and she opened the windows, which let in an immediate breeze of fresh air. I could hear her rummaging in my fridge for food; she knew I always kept a great stash at my place. It was almost soothing to hear someone else moving around—the gentle clanking of dishes, the opening, and closing of doors and drawers. I must have been lost in shock because, in a moment, she had returned with a few plates of food and some drinks.

“Okay, girl.” She poured me a glass and handed it to me; when I didn’t immediately take it, she picked up one of my wrists and wrapped my fingers around the stem for me. “I know it’s fresh, but you have to talk to someone, all right? Let it out.”

We sat there for some time. She wouldn’t press me anymore, but she also wouldn’t move the conversation along. She expected me to participate and coax out the pain.

I fingered the glass in my hand, appreciating the smooth, cold surface against my hot, dewy skin. The white wine bubbled inside, and when I brought it close to my mouth, it tickled my stuffy nose. I let a little bit get through my lips. I was never a drinker, but this sizzling sweet taste did seem to calm some of my fire.

“Well...” What a great start. I already hated myself. “You know the guy who was staying here? We danced at the party way back when?” I crossed my legs on the couch and tucked myself in tight to the cushions.

I hadn’t mentioned Andre to Anna since the night of the dance. I didn’t know why. Maybe I was afraid to get in trouble. Maybe I worried that Anna would be unhappy with things. Why? I had no idea since she was the one to point the thought into my mind in the first place.

“Mister tall, tan, and handsome? Yeah, of course, we all knew him. Momma said that if she put in a little bit of effort, she knew he would sweep her off her feet.” Anna sat in a small armchair next to the couch so she could face me while we talked.

She took a deep glug of her wine and wiped her mouth on the back of her hand. She was always ready to drink and had excellent resistance to alcohol. She could keep up with any of the farmhands and quickly outpaced Mr. Frey years ago.

I almost laughed. Almost. Mrs. Frey always had a golden heart in her, and I loved her feisty attitude. “Yes, him.” I took another pause and a deep breath for my admission. “Well, I told you about him briefly after the dance the second night he was here. And I mean, it was no secret, you could see how close we had gotten by the time we all went to the river.”

I continued fidgeting. It was all I could do to keep myself from crying again. I could feel my lip fatten and quiver. “We had grown really close. Andre never got in the way of my work, of course, but every night we would get together and hang out. I really thought he had changed.”

Anna gave a soft sigh and pouted with a frown. She reached out and patted my knee. “Oh, sweetheart, I am sorry... It does seem that way with men, huh? They do a complete one-eighty and then all of a sudden spin back around quick enough to break your neck.” Thank goodness...

I did have a fear deep in my chest that she would reprimand me for my actions. It was nice to just have an ear to listen that wasn't going to judge or hurt me even further.

“Yeah.” I agreed softly. “I didn't think he was going to do that to me, though. He never gave me any indication of that. Really, he had changed. This farm did him so much good, but his heart's still cold, I guess...” I emptied my cup, and Anna was quick to fill it with the bottle on the coffee table. I took another sip and licked my lips. My feet were already starting to feel tingly, and a different heat began to bloom in my cheeks.

“Go on, what happened that caused all these tears?” she coaxed ever so softly. “Get it all out of you now so you can move on with everything else.”

“So, he um...” I wasn’t sure I should tell her what happened in the barn that morning. She was my employer after all, or at least the daughter of my employer, and my goodness, some of those things we did didn’t deserve words. “Well, he said that if we were to be together, I would have to go back home.”

“You’re kidding.” Anna gasped and inhaled another mouthful of wine. She was already a glass and a half in. She didn’t have cheeks that seemed nearly as red as my own. I guessed it had been a while since I had drunk. “But Lilly, home is death for you. You were so sad when you came here. How could he ask that of you?”

She knew me so well, a loyal best friend who listened to all of my concerns and remembered what I had told her. When we had gotten close, I had told her about my life in New York City and how my family had treated me. What my brother wanted to do with me and how I had wasted hours of my life on the balcony just for a few more moments with the only trees around.

“I have no idea, Anna.” My eyes burned. “We had known each other so well when we were younger. You’d think he would understand, but he didn’t take anything that I wanted into consideration.” I sniffled. I could feel my tears coming back. “He treated me like an item; I had no say.”

Her eyes were wide, but she was letting me get it all out before she said anything.

“He said that my brother told him to do it. You know, Will? Andre apparently asked William for his blessing. He then went on a tirade about how I was supposed to come back home and be in the family business. My life isn’t worth living if it doesn’t involve making them all more money. Nothing I said mattered. Nothing I ever said to either of them had ever mattered.”

“You always have a say here,” Anna said gently. She looked down in contemplation.

She seemed so stoic from our conversation; I had hoped I hadn’t ruined her afternoon. I emptied my glass, but she was just slightly slower to refill it this time.

I was curious. Anna was always so knowing about my issues. I wondered if she had once been in love. “What about you, Anna? I never see you with anyone...” Maybe listening to her story would make me feel a bit better and put all of my problems in perspective, if only a little bit.

She snorted gently and took another swig, sitting back heavily in her chair. “Yeah, that’s a whole other story, I think.” Yet another swig. “You know the name on the back of the card you showed me, the one that brought you here?”

I thought for a moment. Did she mean the card that I found in the coffee shop? I rooted around in my wallet for it—I had kept the business card to maybe one day put in a scrapbook or something. I wasn’t that kind of person, though, so it really just helped to fill everything up.

“The business card? Oh yeah, I remember that. There was a man’s name on the back of it.” What was the name? *M* something...

“Yes, Martin Grayson. He was my fiancé at the time those cards were written.” She hung her head gently. “But when he learned he wouldn’t be getting the estate in his name at the event of my parent’s death, he became outraged. Apparently, that was the only reason he was with me.”

I gasped. How could anyone be so selfish and terrible to Anna? She was sweeter than sugar, with a heart as gold as springtime honey. I could never imagine going so out of my way to do something so terrible to her.

“Yes, Martin said his entire goal with me was to get my ‘fortune.’ He thought this entire resort was some kind of mass money market. This, of course, all came out after a family dinner where Dad said that I needed to work hard if I was going to be the next ‘Lady of Rosemary Estates.’” She

glugged her wine again, and I could hear a change in her voice.

“‘How could you?’ He roared at Daddy. I had never seen him so mad, and Dad really didn’t know what to do with him. He looked so shocked. ‘I am going to be her husband; everything she owns will be mine and mine alone; nothing you have is going to her.’ Momma stepped in and slapped him right across the face. She told him never to speak to Daddy like that again and that they would do with their belongings what they wanted. Neither they nor I would be controlled like that. I had honestly never seen that attitude coming from him. I thought he was sweet and genuine.”

She took a pause. “It was that day like I can imagine today is for you, that I realized people just aren’t who you think they are sometimes. You can’t judge a book by its cover, right? Well, you can’t read a book through the first few chapters, either. You have to make it all the way to the end, the last bit that it has to show you before you can finally form an opinion and get a full message.”

She was right.

Sometimes no matter how well you think you might know a person, they could surprise you with something you never even thought possible—like breaking your heart after amazing sex in a horse barn.

“This place may be for-profit, but there isn’t much profit at all, Lilly. Once we get done paying everyone, utilities, and insurances, we have enough to make ends meet and just a tinge more. We are comfortable, but not millionaires. Comfortable. And that’s enough for us.”

That idea seemed like it fit the Freys pretty accurately. They were always so happy despite the hard work and dedication Rosemary Farm required.

“I’m so sorry, Anna... That’s terrible.”

“It was terrible, but it’s over now, and I am here for you. Tonight is for you.” She gave what seemed like a forced smile.

I couldn't imagine the pain she had thinking of what that man had done to her. The sun had started going down, and the golden light was filtering through my sheer curtains, lighting the inside of the house on fire and making my plants rise to try to get the last few drops of sunlight they could for the day.

We spent the rest of the evening in a gentle conversation. We talked about boys, horses, and choices made on the farm. At one point, I turned on my TV, and we enjoyed some comedy. Thank goodness for standup—I never realized how much I liked standup despite NYC being the heart and home of the entertainment. After enough TV and wine, we were giddy and happy again. I wasn't thinking too much of "you know who," which was just fine by me. The sun had gone down, the stars were out, and the moon was intruding into my home with vigor.

Eventually, Anna excused herself, and I offered to walk her back to her place as she wobbled when she stood up. She declined and vowed to text me when she wandered into her bedroom in about twenty minutes. How hard could it be? It was only a few minutes away.

We shared another laugh, and she left the bottle for me to enjoy myself. There was no point in telling her it was empty. Anna gave me the biggest hug I had ever gotten and kissed me on the cheek, too, with a loud and dramatic smack. "You'll be fine. Sleep it off, and you'll be right as rain before you know it."

The door shut softly behind her, and I took a deep breath. I was thankful not to have had to spend the majority of that night alone; my heart would have broken entirely in two. I had not only promised her, but I had promised myself that I would take better care of myself from then on. That would start immediately. "Lillian comes first" became my mantra.

I tucked myself into bed, still dizzy from the wine—it was so good. My bed was so silky, fluffy, and soft. I curled my toes and brushed my legs over the luxurious surface. The only thing I was lacking was a pudgy cat to knead me over the downy blanket. I refused to look at my phone, fearing that "you know who" may have texted me. Eventually, after

watching the stars blink over the sky through the massive window that acted as my headboard, I fell asleep, a deep, dark, dreamless sleep for which I was thankful.

I needed a break from the nightmare.

TIME PASSED, and I worked hard on Rosemary Farm. Every single day I promised I would do more and do it better than the day before. I felt myself getting so strong, and I used all of my energy during the day, so I slept better, too. I certainly was looking fit. My breasts also looked much larger as well, what a perk. I vowed to improve myself so that if the pain Andre had caused ever threatened to infect me again that I would be too strong and not allow it in.

However, after a few months of the arduous labor, I feared things were starting to take a toll on me. One afternoon, after a long day in the field, I started feeling sick. Not just “oh boy, ibuprofen would really clear up this headache” but nauseous, acidic. At first, I thought it was the sun. It wasn’t an odd sight to see a fieldhand taking too much under their belt for the day and ending up with heat stroke or sun poisoning by early afternoon. It turned out not to be that. I never got better on the days that I would work with Mrs. Frey in the kitchen, hiding from the sun.

Then I thought it was from doing jobs bending over—crunching up my belly. Sure, it was rough in the fields when picking produce, but when I was out hanging laundry on the lines well above my head, I felt the same, going from reaching into a hip-high basket to all the way up to toss towels over the line. When I started getting nauseous, and Anna caught me throwing up behind the greenhouse, she finally asked me what was up; I hadn’t been myself. I hadn’t even been eating all that much for the amount of work I was doing.

“What the heck is going on with you? You are constantly green around the gills. You actually look like a drowned fish half the time. How do you even manage that?”

“Yikes, Anna, that’s pretty harsh,” I would give her a snapback. “I’m not sure; maybe I caught a bug or something?”

She raised an eyebrow at me. She didn't believe that, and frankly, neither did I. "What kind of bug? It's been like three weeks that I've caught you out back here, puking into the weeds."

"I know. I know... I have no idea what's going on." At least that much was true. I hadn't put the pieces together quite yet.

"Can you promise me you'll go to the doctor then?" Anna asked, genuine concern on her face. "I'm worried something more serious might be going on than just a cold."

I promised her. What else could I do?

At the doctor's, nothing was found. I was deemed to be in perfect health, and the doctor wished all of his patients were as healthy as I was. I was fit, active, and all my tests came back pretty good. Well, I guessed that was something to be proud of, right?

I had noticed my periods had stopped, and the doctor had said with strenuous activity and weight loss that might be normal for me. I thought nothing of it, but when my favorite jeans no longer fit, and my stomach felt firm, I felt a rock sink in my heart...

"Anna, do you have a minute?" I whispered to her in the kitchen where she was busy cramming a ham and cheese sandwich into her mouth.

She looked over her shoulder at me, a piece of lettuce hanging out of her lips. She nodded, of course. She always had time for me. I pulled her aside into the sunroom for privacy and closed the white French doors behind us.

I was going to be as frank as possible. No wasted time, no beating around the bush. "Look, my boobs hurt. I don't think I've had my period for like three months now... I have acne and my stomach? Look." I pulled up my shirt; my jeans were unbuttoned, a rubber band held them together. I had only gotten this far thanks to oversized button-downs. My belly was ever so slightly bulged; it looked like I'd had a very salty meal, but the bump was firm. I poked it to prove my point.

“You’re pregnant?” Anna gasped, almost inhaling a piece of bread.

I tried to hush her with a few hisses and a finger to her lip. She threatened to lick it, and I grimaced.

“No, no, no, no, no.” I laughed nervously, putting my hands on my hips. “Absolutely not. There’s no chance.”

“You’re right, Blotches is a girl.” She gave me a side-eye so coy I could have smacked her.

“You jerk. No, I must be sick or something. I bet it’s a tumor.”

“You are also a drama queen. You know that you’re pregnant; don’t play around. They have TV shows of women in denial all nine months only to be surprised when they pop a baby out in the bathroom of a 7-11. I have a pregnancy test left over. Would you like to take it?” She offered gently, and I waved her off again.

Still, she took my arm and led me to her family’s wing in the house to their bathroom. She handed me a single stick, individually wrapped in a foil pack.

“Pee on this, and all your answers will be given. I think I would be more worried about a tumor.”

I glared at her and took the test. “I won’t take it; I’ll just die alone in my little hut.”

“Oh great, let me join you, pencil me in for 4 pm.”

“Got it.” I gave her a nervous chuckle and pretended to tick off a box with the pregnancy test as a pen. I knew I was pregnant. I wasn’t stupid. I wasn’t going to pretend it wasn’t happening, but I really guessed that I had been in a severe case of disbelief.

I left the Freys and jogged back to my house. My breasts bounced obnoxiously on the way, too. My bra did nothing to support them. They had grown so much and so quickly and were very sore.

I spent hours thinking about this test. What if I took it? How could I have done this to myself? I shouldn’t have let

him finish in me. I shouldn't have had sex with him at all. I was so selfish and stupid. But the moment was amazing; the sex was great... Should I really feel remorse for that? Having someone make my body feel so incredible?

After an evening of beating myself up, I decided it was now or never. Who knew, I might end up in a gas station bathroom like Anna said if I didn't dive headfirst into this. The used test sat on the sink's edge in the bathroom as I paced back and forth through my tiny home. Every single pass in the two minutes that the directions said it could take felt longer and longer. I was certain that time had stopped.

Finally, the alarm on my phone went off. I rushed into the bathroom and picked up the capped test to read the results through the little plastic screen.

Positive.

Andre

Six months had passed since I had left the farm. I had left hastily, but that moment I had left the barn, I knew exactly what I had to do. I had to fix things.

Work was grueling throughout this entire time. I was making so many changes so quickly no one could keep up with me. I was flooding money into my business; it was the only way to make those ends meet, to get my goals crossed off. My assistant threatened to quit, and I told her that was fine, I could manage by myself—in reality, if I were left to it alone, I would probably pull my hair out.

I knew what I did was wrong. Will's word was not the gospel. Lilly had the right to choose what she wanted. How could I make things right, though? My company was based in New York City to buy and sell stock for clients, and we were insanely successful, but how could I make it better?

She wanted wilderness and freedom. She wasn't going to get any of that in the city, so I would never ask her to come back to the city again. She didn't want her family, so I wouldn't involve them in my decisions, in her decisions, or in the decisions we would ultimately make together.

So how could I maintain my business without a loss and bring everything I needed to provide for Lilly all the way out to the farm? She was four hours away. Well... Thank God for the internet.

There was no reason to keep all of those people in the office. Modern-day was no longer the place to maintain a sea

of cubicles. The building I owned was just a status symbol. I didn't need it. A few months ago, I would have slapped someone who told me that, of course, I needed it. How else would anyone know how profitable my company was? How would they know how rich I was? I finally figured out that it didn't matter. It never had.

I no longer cared about status symbols. Rosemary Farm straightened my head on my shoulders and taught me what the important things were. Hard work and family. Who cared if I had the fanciest suits or linen shirts. Even if someone did care, they weren't the kind of people I wanted in my life. Status symbols—gone. The building was sold within a week on the market.

I ordered hundreds of computers and gifted each of my employees. I checked with every single worker to make sure they could work from home. To my surprise, they all seemed delighted to no longer be tethered to the office. I even offered to cover the internet bill for my employees. I made sure to give the housemaids and other workers who relied on the office location excellent reviews to achieve even better-paying opportunities.

Production went up with everyone working from home. I was amazed. They were healthier, and we used less sick time. As a whole, we wasted less time on lost days, which made clients happier. I couldn't believe the change in my staff. My relationship with my employees improved, and I found myself frequently holding conversations with them that didn't directly involve work. That had never happened before.

No one had wanted anything to do with me before. They had all avoided me like the plague.

I felt better going to work now, more accomplished. My employees often said the same thing to me in virtual meetings. I had fewer arguments on the phone with clients and coworkers, and even shareholders seemed to be able to dish more out than they were previously willing to. Money kept rolling in after all of my initial investments were made. I had made my money back in just three months.

I decided that after all the hard work, I wanted to thank Greg. Sure, things were rocky between Lilly and me, but no way would I let that stop me. I wanted to thank him for giving me such a change in my life. None of it would've been possible without him.

“Sure guy, where do you want to go?” Greg’s gravelly voice sounded so familiar over the phone; it was very comforting.

I suggested Alfredo’s, a quaint little Italian place on the corner only a few blocks from work. He agreed, and we set a date for lunch.

“Thanks for meeting me,” I noted after we placed our order.

I got us both a giant Stromboli and some garlic knots. A pitcher of soda was set next to us on the table covered in a red-and-white-checkered plastic tablecloth.

“You look like you’re in a good mood, man, what’s up?” He sipped his drink.

The scruff around his mouth had been growing in all summer. I wondered if he was growing a beard or had just been that busy with work. I immediately realized that, before I went to the farm, I hadn’t paid the kind of attention I should have to my friend.

I rubbed the back of my head, sheepishly. “Thanks, things have really been great since I got back. I wanted to say thank you for your recommendation.”

“What, the vacation? No problem. I told you I go there all the time. I’m due to be there in a week or two, I think?” Greg poured us both some of the sweet cola—of course, this place didn’t have a name brand soft drink, but it was the off-brand that was always the best after all.

“Oh, yeah? Good for you. Since going, I think I have changed a lot... You know, from what I was.” I tapped the table with a little anxiety in my voice. Did I really want the answers to my questions? “Was I really...bad?”

Greg waited; he watched me and took another long drink. Again it was his personality to wait before giving an answer to a question. It was just as irritating as ever, but I had more patience. I knew that if I gave him enough time, his answer would always be honest and real.

“Yeah, I’d say so. At least after high school.” He sat back as the waiter came over and delivered our food to the table.

She set down everything in front of us, and I thanked her for bringing it over.

“Like that,” he said, “you were never nice to waitstaff before.”

I cringed. That was about the worst thing I could have heard. “Really? Why did you put up with me? Why didn’t you say anything?”

I tapped my fingers nervously on the table after sitting forward, watching him carefully.

More silence.

“You want honesty? It’s not going to be nice.” He cut himself a slice of the Stromboli and took a big bite of it. He spoke with a full mouth. “I don’t want to lose out on lunch just for a little honesty. No one ever buys me lunch.”

I felt bad... I had never bought him lunch before; Greg was such a hard worker and had done so much for me. I had never returned the favor.

I watched him. It felt as if time had slowed down, almost stopped. Honesty. Had anyone ever given me that besides Lillian? Everyone else was apparently so scared of me that they would never say anything I didn’t like to my face.

“Say it,” I urged him on.

“You were a little bitch, Andre.” He slurped down a long slough of melted cheese and popped a garlic knot into his mouth. “You were a jerk, just like the rest of them.”

I grunted and hung my head. I knew that already, but I wanted confirmation. I wanted someone to say just how bad I was.

“The rest of them?” My jaw was dropped, but at least I knew I wasn’t alone.

“William, the other guys he runs with. They’re all assholes, man. You were one, too, but it looks like you needed a change, and you got one.” He sat back in his seat and finished his slice of Stromboli. I hadn’t even gotten one yet. “I’m just glad you saw the need for that change yourself and leaned into it. Good for you.”

I looked down at the table, at my hands, palms up. The lines were so intricate, and I studied them. I couldn’t believe I had been that cut off from the world around me. I glanced over at all the food on the table, but I couldn’t bother to eat. My stomach was doing flip flops between my ribs. If we were honest, I felt pretty gross.

“I’m sorry.” It was the only thing I could think to say.

“The Andre I knew a few months ago wouldn’t have said that. He would’ve shoved a finger in my face and told me off and stormed out of the building to leave me with the bill.” He took another slice of Stromboli and put it on my plate. “You don’t have to be sorry. You’ve obviously changed. For the better. I am still going to eat as much as I can right now in case that happens, though.”

“I guess I have.” I gave him a single breathy laugh and waved at him. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to take it from you. I wouldn’t do that.”

Greg smiled and chugged his cup of soda after downing another garlic knot. He really could put it away. He had a bit of sauce stuck in the scruff of his beard but dabbed it away with the paper towel given to him as a napkin.

I sat there for a minute, thinking. Soon, I noticed I was bringing food to my mouth, and I appreciated the flavors. “I met someone at the farm, you know?” My stomach growled. I guess self-contemplation made me hungry.

Greg looked up; he had dipped into his phone while I went into a trance. “Oh, yeah? Some farm girl? Was she cute?”

I wasn't sure if I should tell him who she was. Of course, he would remember Lilly. We were all so close in high school. "She was so cute, dude. She was smart and kind and funny and energetic. It was so refreshing to be around someone like that."

"You always liked the blonde ones; I know that. Was she blonde?" Another garlic knot met its demise.

"Nail on the head. She was something else, man—homey, smart, patient." I felt like I looked dreamy.

Maybe stuffing as many garlic knots into my face as I could like the chipmunk I was eating with would help disguise my look.

"You really have changed, huh?" He laughed and sat back a bit in his seat, making room for his stomach that seemed a bit more bulged than his usual ever so slight beer belly. "Normally you'd be saying things like 'giant rack' or 'fat ass' or 'dumb bimbo.' Good for you Andre, did you get lucky?"

Greg did a good job of trying to fit in and continue the conversation with the guys—apparently, the guys he detested.

I chuckled. "Yes. But in more ways than one. She was really wonderful. I'm just glad for the time I got to spend with her."

"Well, hey, like I said, glad I could help. The farm has set me on the straight and narrow more times than I would like to count, so make sure you get there pretty often, okay?" He signaled to our waiter and had them box up the Stromboli in two halves. He handed me a box and patted me on the back. "It's not like we can't afford it, right? Besides, everyone there is so appreciative of the income. It's like a two-fer boost of good tidings." He nodded, though, and reached out his hand. "Good for you. I mean it. Hopefully, the changes stick."

We got up, and I shook his hand over the table firmly. I was pretty sure it was the first time I ever shook Greg's hand.

I paid the tab at the counter, and I met him outside. He clapped me sharply on the back, and I gave him another thank you. I noted that I would have a lot of work for him to do in

the next month or so and told him to clear his schedule, which he met with a grumble. He said all my work was hard, but he promised he would make it work. We parted ways, and I called an Uber to come to pick me up. Who needed a car in NYC after all?

Lillian

My stomach was growing nicely—or at least that’s what some people would say. I was able to hide it most of the time under long shirts, and once the weather was started to cool, flannel button-downs. It was getting more and more challenging to move. However, I wasn’t willing to admit that yet.

“What are you going to do when it gets to be too much?” Anna was helping me push a wheelbarrow filled with garden waste after we had cleaned out one of the small flower beds for the season. She had one arm of the barrow in her hands, and I had the other. The barrow wasn’t incredibly heavy, but the effort was just enough to be annoying for me.

I patted my stomach. My belly button was about to pop, and my breasts had doubled in size, and it felt as if they quadrupled in weight. I gave her a giant, admittedly fake, smile and then a thumbs up with my free hand.

“I figure I’ll need a bassinet in the house at some point. That’s what babies sleep in, right? Not hollowed-out logs I dragged in from the woods?”

Anna scoffed. She faked horror and rolled her head to save her eyes from doing all the work. “Yes, girl, that’s what babies sleep in, but you can’t work at nine-months pregnant. You can’t work after having a baby. You’re going to be a mess.” She took the wheelbarrow over to the compost pile and dumped it out to mix in with the rest.

“The doctor says everything is going well. I had an ultrasound last week.” I used the pitchfork to help mix it in.

“Besides, women in other countries don’t coddle themselves so much. They work, have the baby one day, and get back to work the next. We have been doing it for a bajillion years. I don’t think I’m too special.”

I tried to be nonchalant about it. I didn’t want any special treatment, and I didn’t want to think about the struggle that would be labor, delivery, and recovery as a single mother.

She understood that I wasn’t really into the planning; it made me nervous.

“Is it a boy or a girl?” Anna asked with genuine curiosity.

“I don’t know, actually. I didn’t want the sonographer to tell me. I guess the more I know, the more real it gets.” I shrugged. The winter had passed. I was due in June, just in time to get in the way of the planting season.

“It is real, Lilly; it’s all real. You are going to be a mom in a few months, and you have no plans. You have no backup. Have you even told my parents yet? They might give you small maternity leave, but they can’t afford to put you up forever. They’re nice people, Lilly, but they struggle, too.”

She was worried, and I knew she wasn’t just talking about the stress I would be putting on her family to be cruel. Anna was trying to snap me back to a reality I was already living in and just feigning detachment from. I guess being considered some thoughtless girl was better than being acknowledged as someone smart who had allowed it to happen. At least that was how I saw it...

I felt my eyes start to burn. I sniffled and rubbed my hands on the back of my head to help loosen the knots that my back and neck were constantly causing.

“Ugh, Lilly, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I’m just worried. I care so much about you, but you won’t let me into whatever little world you’re building for yourself over there in your head.”

“No, I know, I know, I’m worried, too, but it makes me feel better not to think about it, you know? It’s not real until

it's real." I knew that wasn't true, but I was still avoiding it tooth and nail.

Anna gave me a long, hard look as she readied the wheelbarrow for the walk to the house. She took my chin in her hand and roughly pulled it up, so I was forced to look her in her eyes. I stared at her in surprise.

"You're lining yourself up for a lifetime of struggle. What is this baby going to do here? What life will you provide it? Have you told the father? Do you even know who he is? You never told me about anyone; I don't think I've ever seen you be too sweet on anyone...except..."

I saw it click in her eyes.

"Andre. It's that man who broke your heart so long ago? Jesus, I thought that was longer than this. Lilly, have you told him? He needs to know."

I took my chin back with a jerk of my head. I didn't want her to know who the father was, at least not yet. I shook it gently, looking at the ground. "No, I haven't told anyone. This is my baby, and it's my decision on what happens with us."

Anna sighed and dropped her shoulders. "Right, I know, Lilly, I know. I'm just so worried about you." She shook her head gently at me as if she might be disappointed.

I couldn't handle if she were, her brow was furrowed, and some tendrils of hair hung just into her face. "Besides, don't you think the daddy would want to know he has a little one on the way? What if he'd be excited to be a father?"

"I'm worried about me, too, believe me, I am. But I am strong. What am I going to do, get hurt a third time? I don't need to bring him back only for him to disappoint the two of us." I put a hand on my belly, just in time to catch the little one kicking. "We are both strong, and we can get through this together. That's all we need." I tapped on my stomach softly in emphasis. "Anna, please don't think I'm not scared."

That was a lot for me to admit. Never in my life did I think of myself as a woman with a family, but there I was.

"I am terrified." It was true.

Anna slid a warm hand across my shoulders. It was comforting and a nice gesture. I hadn't felt comfortable since the baby had started pressing on my spine, but at least having a friend like her put a little love back into my life.

I was happy; however, I had a lot of love to give, and I told Anna that. The Freys still loved me. They never changed how they treated me, and Anna had only become more supportive. That was the family I had always wanted—who was I not to have a baby in the happiest time of my life? The struggle would exist in one way or another. She was still a little doubtful, but agreed that if that all was true, who was she to disagree with me?

Anna took the wheelbarrow up the rest of the hill to dump with the compost and came back down to meet me to save me the steps. We parted ways back at the flower gardens that were still being plucked and prepped to make way for the last freeze and the growth that would follow.

Later that day in the golden afternoon, I headed down to the dam to feed the sunfish and make sure no algae was growing in the water when I noticed a small group with Mr. Frey. He was doing an introduction tour—a bunch of visitors had just arrived.

“Ah, and here is Ms. Lillian; she is new to us as of last summer but has quickly become a golden member of our team here.” Mr. Frey called me over, motioning with one of his arms in broad swoops.

I joined him, and he put his arm around me and commented about my glow—the good fresh air and sunshine did that to people on the farm, he noted. He knew better than that.

“If you have any questions and see Lillian out and about, she's the one to ask.”

I smiled and waved at the group, taking in their faces. There were various people, men and women, but when I noticed someone in the back, and I felt a bit puzzled.

Who was that? He had rusty hair and lines on his face despite looking closer to my age than the older people next to him. He was wearing a baseball cap and had worn clothing. If he weren't in this group, I'd assume he was a new hire and that I'd be training him soon.

The crowd moved on, following Mr. Frey off to the apple orchards to be introduced to our working bees and given some fresh in-season fruit if any remained. I was able to catch the man who tailed the rest of the group.

"Hey," I gave a cheery hello, waving. I instinctually placed a hand under my belly to support it in my awkward little jog. "Hey, how are you doing?"

The man stopped and turned around to face me with a smile. He seemed a bit surprised that I would approach him. "I'm good, thank you, ma'am. You're Lillian, right?" He put a hand to his chin in thought. "You've changed since high school, looking great." His voice was as rough as cinders, a direct opposite from Andre, who I instinctually had an urge to compare him to, but why?

"Hey, thanks... If I'm not mistaken, you're one of Will's friends. Greg, right?" That was exactly who he had to be, but my God had he changed.

"That's me, square and center. How's the family?"

"Eh, I wouldn't know. I've been out here since, well, since last July, I suppose? I couldn't really tell you. It all feels like a dream." I gave a breathy laugh and scratched my head.

"I can agree with that. I've been here every year since I left school, wouldn't do without it."

"Agreed. You look great, too. What do you do now?" He was built like a house, though he had the tiniest little beer belly, kind of like me a few months back.

"Oh, me? I'm a contractor in the city. I guess I'm the only one of the group, well besides you now, who went on to do anything with their hands. All the guys from back home are too busy on their phones and computers making money. That was never my deal."

I gave him a nod in agreement. “Hey, I can get behind that. I motioned to the rest of the farm. “This has been life-changing for me. I can absolutely understand the want to do something physical. You get the satisfaction of seeing your results and producing something directly.”

“Hey, you get it.” He seemed happy and nodded, his hands on his hips.

I did get it. My family would never get it. Will would never get it. I thought that Andre would get it or had gotten it while he was there, but I was very wrong.

“Well, nice seeing you, Lillian. I hope to see you around the farm once in a while. Maybe you can teach me something about fish.” He beamed a bright country smile, nodding to the dam we were standing in front of, and jogged off to catch up with the group after waving me goodbye.

I waved off after him in agreement and silently wished he had a good stay. He seemed like he had grown up right, unlike all the other men I’d been associated with from our childhood.

I turned to look at the dam; the fish were waiting like silver and blue and yellow ghosts under the water, impatient for the pellets in my bucket. Every once in a while, they’d think something had dropped in for them but be disappointed to grab gaping mouthfuls of air.

It had been a while since I’d seen Greg. I was glad he was well.

I was glad to see that at least one of William’s friends hadn’t turned out like a monster. He seemed like a genuinely nice guy.

I threw a handful of pellets into the water and sprayed them across the surface as best I could. I loved watching the fish gobble and snap them up, and they slid over each other like snakes to get a taste. They would do anything to get what they wanted, and doing this at least allowed me a little quiet time to let me think. With everyone asking me questions lately, it was always nice to have a little bit of “me time.”

Andre

Everything was ready. All of my work was finally paying off. I had spent the entire New York winter fighting tooth and nail to make the changes I needed to see.

I had created new positions in the company to make sure that things could be self-automated. After weeks, people had finally been promoted and trained in their new roles to help the business automate. I would no longer be required to be on-site for operations to continue.

There were tiers of workers now, which gave the staff incentives to perform better to achieve promotions.

I had been a bit of a control freak on top of everything else. No one would tell me otherwise, but looking back on it, I had everyone attached to me at the hip. I wanted to be involved in everything everyone was doing all the time. I needed to know where my money was going and how it was coming in.

It made the employees feel more comfortable, too. They no longer had to worry about the owner of the company breathing down their neck. Apparently, I was regarded as something of a dragon to my staff. That wasn't always meant as a compliment.

They were able to work at their own pace. It made them more productive. Transaction numbers skyrocketed. Who knew employees didn't always perform their best 9-5 pm? I was watching the trends and saw that the majority of my employees were working earlier or later hours than expected.

Some said that they were able to have their kids at home to school them, or at least spend more time with them. They were saving money on daycare, and spouses were getting more done around the house. I would have never known these were stresses that they were experiencing if they didn't feel more confident to talk to me about it...

I even provided them some additional benefits like more vacation days, beefier retirement packages, and tenure prizes. Next year we would be giving away a car—a Valkyrie.

But despite all of it, I was still scared. Lilly and I had left on such poor terms. Would Lilly forgive me for being so hot-headed at the moment? Would she believe that I had really made so many changes to myself and the business?

I wouldn't blame her if she didn't believe me. How could she? I had been a jerk twice now. I was so much worse than a jerk. I was a pure asshole. How could I go back and tell her how I felt? What I've been working so hard? I had redesigned my entire business around her; what if she said no?

I had done even more than changing the entire scope of business operations, though. I had found a house just a few miles from the farm. It was close as I could get it outside of the bubble of property the entire estate owned. It was a nice sized farmhouse on a bit of land itself. It needed work, but I already had a construction crew fixing it up.

I had hired Greg to go out there, keep an eye on things, make sure everything was going smoothly, and remedy problems. He said he would take payment in a stay at Rosemary Farm, so how could I deny him? If there were anyone I trusted, at least anymore, it was him. I knew he was going to make sure everything would be exactly as intended.

I wanted the house to be a perfect place to start a life. I didn't want her to struggle anymore. I didn't want her to have to sweat or swear if she didn't want to. I knew she was independent, of course, so I didn't want her to feel controlled, so there would be tons of opportunity for her to personalize things after the renovation was done. After all, she couldn't customize anything if the entire home were being gutted.

He had arrived at the farm yesterday and texted, saying that he would check the house out today and tell me how things were going. I was getting nervous because it was past noon, and if things were smooth, he would've reached out first thing in the morning.

What could have happened? Did the place burn down overnight? Did the walls cave in? Did the roof fly off? ...Did it even have a roof right now? They planned to tear the damn thing off and replace it, but had that been gotten to yet?

As I paced through my apartment, the only thing taller than me was the horizon—not tree branches to shade me, not clouds to float over me, not birds to sing to me. I watched the cloudless sky remain static over the city through the floor-to-ceiling windows that allowed my room to be washed with the polluted sunshine.

I permitted myself to drown in toxic thoughts. What if I had messed up beyond repair and all of it was for nothing?

Well... My business would benefit. I was already getting news about my operations changes and how I was considered “progressive” for a high-brow business. My employees were better. I was making more money. I now owned real, beautiful property, not some building in the middle of a concrete jungle that, at the end of the day, would be considered ugly and obsolete by the end of the decade. Things would be okay, no matter what. That was my job, and I would make it happen.

That was another skill I had learned on the farm. No matter what the issue, everything would work out in the end. I would make it work because I am capable of it. Sure, I never doubted myself in business, but problems were problems. Now, the issues didn't seem so important.

Either I could fix them, and they weren't an issue to be concerned about for long, or I didn't have control over them, and then I didn't worry because it wasn't worth it. It was like some strange yogi message that I had learned while brushing horses and picking flowers. I guessed that these were just some ways to connect with my inner self.

I silently thanked Greg again for the opportunity to be just that little bit better of a person.

My phone buzzed on my desk, and I nearly shook out of my skin. How long had I been staring out the window? My eyes burned from not blinking. I gave them a quick rub and some fierce blinks to clear them up as I grabbed my phone. I even managed to rub one while I tried to focus on the bright neon screen and read his text.

“Hey, work’s getting done, but there’s more of it than a new house. You knew that getting into it, though.” He was short and to the point which I appreciated.

“You got it. Any other updates?”

“Well, looks like they have the bathroom downstairs done—though it doesn’t have a toilet yet. The roof is halfway up, the yard is mowed, and the shrubs are planted. They’re getting it done, just seems slow.”

“Can you do anything while you are out there?” I knew his work would be good, and while I trusted the people I hired to make Lillian’s dream home, I knew Greg would put the finishing touches and the heart into it.

“Sure can. I brought some stuff. I’ll see what I can do. You said Lillian likes sunflowers, right?”

“Yeah, they’re her favorite.”

“And you plan to stick with the main... event?”

I chuckled; he had no reason to beat around the bush.

“Of course. I know she is the woman I want to marry. Can you set the back yard up for that?”

“And you are absolutely positive that you won’t want some chapel wedding or something at an expensive venue come time?”

I had thought about it. A glamorous wedding with an expensive dress for her, something to really show her off. Decorations to wow all of the guests and food better than anyone has ever had. And the cake? Sky-high, as high as my old building, enough for everyone to get seconds and thirds

and fourths, and we would still have some left to freeze for our anniversaries for years to come.

But that wasn't her. Lillian would hate that. She would want small, comfortable, charming. Quiet. Something filled with only the people she loved. She would want Anna there, and probably the Freys since they all seemed so close and cozy. She would probably wear a box store dress that happened to come in white; she would keep herself natural.

If I had told any of my friends what I was planning, they would all laugh at me. When had I become such an insufferable hillbilly? They'd call her names and probably shun me. I hadn't talked to Will since that last "lovely" conversation about Lilly, and I had no desire to talk to him ever again. I never wanted to see any of the people I had grown up with. They weren't who I identified with anymore.

"Hey, Andre, you still there?"

How long had I been daydreaming? I had been allowing myself to fade off more and more. It was a time-passing skill that I had learned on the farm with the absence of technology.

"Oh, yeah, sure, sorry, man, I was just a bit lost in thought."

"No problem, but you're sure that you are okay with a backyard wedding?" he texted again, urging me to give him an actual answer.

"Yes, yes, I am sure that's exactly what I want. That's what she'll want, too."

"All right, if that's what you want, then I'll get started. I already have the backyard laid out, and the lines spray painted, so I think that everything can get together by the time you need it. The flowers will look good too."

"Thanks."

There was a pause in our texts. I had put down my phone, thinking that was it, but after I had walked away, my back to my desk, I heard the signature vibration pattern. Perplexed, not expecting anything else, I went back to it.

“I saw Lillian when I was at the farm, you know. She came up to me, recognized me from school.”

I had eventually admitted my love for her to Greg when we had met up during conversation for the house. He wasn't surprised.

“Oh, yeah? How was she?” I longed so much for her; I craved to have her around. I was desperate for anything, any news, any information that I could get of her.

“Eh, you know how chicks her age are, getting into trouble, biting off more than they can chew. She seemed good, though. Looks fit. You might have competition, though. I was kind of hesitant to talk to you about it, what with the conversation of a wedding and all.”

I chuckled. She did look great. I felt a twinge in my chest and prayed it was a heart attack rather than more feelings I couldn't control.

“Did she say anything to you? Did you say hello? And what do you mean by that last bit?”

Competition? She couldn't have found someone else... I knew it had been a few months since I had left, but she couldn't have put me out so quickly. Had I hurt her that much that she was so ready to move on?

“Oh, sure, yeah. She came right up and introduced herself. Friendly as I remember her being. Why the hell she was with you way back when I'll never know.”

I chuckled. I wouldn't know, either. I was still nervous about Greg's statement, though. What did he mean “competition?”

“What do you mean competition, though, Greg. Was someone else out there with her?”

There was a long pause; a lot of weight was owed to his silence. Every single moment he waited, my heart thumped harder and harder in my ribs. I thought they might break. I couldn't wait for him to take his time to respond anymore.

“Greg? What did you mean by that?”

“Turns out, I think she’s pregnant. She was holding her belly, looked pretty well-sized, too. I’d say like, half a watermelon? Man, I didn’t want to tell you... I don’t know what’s going on. I’m only trying my best on my end.” He seemed genuinely upset. “I didn’t want you to go through with all of this and then find this out when it’s too late to go back. Just in case.”

What? What did he say? Pregnant? Now I knew the feeling in my chest was a heart attack... I swayed. She could have been sleeping around, except I knew Lilly... She wouldn’t do that. Not to herself.

My head started to feel hot, and I thought I saw a dark shadow start to obscure my vision. Was I passing out? The baby... Could it be mine? I started hastily counting back on my fingers to when I was there... to the day I emptied myself into her... It lined up, depending on how far along she was. If she had a closer due date, that meant there was someone before me, a later one, and she had moved on and found someone else. And became particularly unlucky.

“Really? Did she say anything about that?” I tried to keep my cool, but I could feel beads of sweat forming at my hairline. God, I was so uncomfortable. I could vomit. I felt the acid in the back of my throat and the lump at the base of my tongue. I got up and paced with the phone in my hand.

“Nope. Didn’t mention it, and I’m not about to be the dude who asks a woman if she’s pregnant, you know? I wasn’t looking to get hit that day. Maybe tomorrow.” He took another pause. “I didn’t want to get in trouble, dude. I just wanted to let you know.”

Oh, good Lord...I couldn’t walk anymore. There was no blood in my head. I sat down in my giant chair; the leather squeaked under me. I felt like I was going to throw up.

“You’re sure she’s pregnant? Absolutely sure, Greg? No screwing around with me?”

“Yeah, sure, it’s just rude to ask, right? I didn’t want to be rude. I know this isn’t the best way to break the news, but I’m

sorry, okay? Sorry, Andre, I guess I should've asked. I'm sorry about the entire thing."

"No, no, you're fine, thanks for checking up. Tell me how things go tomorrow, okay?"

"You got it." The dots danced on the screen, and I waited for another message to come through. "Do you think it's yours?"

Now I was silent. I didn't know what to say. Yes, of course, the baby could be mine. Was I mad about it? No. It was what I wanted, not really in the timeframe that I was comfortable with, but eventually, I wanted a family with her.

What if it were someone else's? Did I care? I waited and hung on that thought. No... I didn't care. I wanted Lilly; I loved her; if she would have me and needed me to step into that role in her life, I would care for that baby as if it were my own. Maybe one day, we could have children together, but until then, what we had would be enough.

"I do. I know it's mine Greg, and I'm going to make sure of it."

I put my phone, screen down, back on my desk. Using my elbows as support, I buried my face in my hands.

"Pregnant? She's pregnant and didn't tell me? Does she even want me back?" I was talking to myself now. Not a single soul was in the room with me, and there I was having a conversation with the air. I was so filled with doubt about everything that I had done. Maybe I had jumped the gun.

Maybe I had moved too quickly. I didn't really take her wants into consideration. What if she didn't want anything to do with me and she wanted me gone.

I felt sick to my stomach. If she was that far along, she meant to keep the thing, too. Was that what I wanted?

Did I want to be a dad?

Another pause, no thought passed through me, not a single one, but an emotion slid between my ears and down to my

chest like warm oil. A dad. A father. And if I could be those things, I could be a husband.

My eyes felt hot, smoky. I clenched my jaw over and over again in a way to force the feeling down, but nothing I could do would stop it. Tears came. They were big and hot and rolled down my cheeks, dripping into little puddles onto the desk.

I was going to be a father. My heart raced in my chest; I didn't die in that heart attack after all.

All I needed was the ring to finish everything else off. I had been working with a jeweler to get everything ready for the day that I asked her to marry me, but = it was time. I wasn't going to let her go through the rest of her pregnancy alone. I wanted to be there every step of the way.

Sunflowers were Lilly's lifeblood. I knew it was so true of her.

I rubbed my head in frustration. It was going to be a long few hours, but I would make it work. I grabbed my jacket since the evenings were getting cold, and I booked a cab for a ride to the jeweler who made all of my custom pieces. I needed someone I could trust. It was the most important thing they would make yet.

And I needed it to be perfect.

Lillian

How far along was I? It felt like it had been years since I had gotten the news that I was going to be a mother. Since I would give birth to a baby. Since my life would change forever in unimaginable ways.

I winced as I tried to straighten myself from bending over while pulling weeds in the garden. With a grunt, I rubbed my back, one hand holding my swollen stomach. I felt a plop of raindrop onto my cheek from the sky. Of course it would rain, how fitting.

Admittedly, I wasn't feeling gray. At first, I was upset and scared but now? I had come to terms with everything. I had prepped my tiny house with a crib and some toys and a highchair that Anna had found while she went out thrift shopping. It was old fashioned but still insanely cute with pink elephants all over it.

The weather still didn't help my mood, which changed as quickly as someone could flip a coin. Spring had sprung, and the rains had come along with it.

It was gray. Things were cooling down significantly, and the breeze was brisk against my skin. The sky began to mist gently, and I decided that I would head in. The last thing that I needed was to be pregnant and sick.

I headed toward the house, enjoying the drooping tulips and daffodils, filled like tiny cups with rainwater and toppling over their own weight. Maybe Mrs. Frey had started some

coffee for the afternoon. I could do with some hot chocolate, too... Anything to get the chill out of my bones.

Food was starting to make me sick, though. There were some things that I couldn't tolerate anymore. Chocolate (thank God) was safe; it was about the only thing I looked forward to anymore. Meat? Nope. Veggies? Eww. Fruit? Get away from me. I had actually lost a little more weight due to the morning sickness that wouldn't seem to let up. Thankfully, my doctor didn't think it was too much of a concern and just told me to stock up where I could with things like peanut butter, pasta, and nuts. Who could complain about that?

Pasta. Potatoes. Rice. Corn. I couldn't get enough of it. I needed so much energy all the time just to support my rigorous routine and the baby growing. Thank goodness that food settled with me well. I knew that tonight, Mrs. Frey was going to make turkey noodle soup with double noodles because it would warm my soul and me, and she said it would help soothe the baby to sleep, too. It often started dancing a jig at nighttime right before bed anyway, so anything to help would be appreciated.

When I had admitted to Mrs. Frey that I was pregnant, she nearly screamed at me for not telling her sooner. Apparently, they would've changed my responsibilities, given me lighter work, had me stay in the house during the winter, but I promised the doctor told me staying active was healthy. She was, of course, extremely skeptical. Anna had been a tough pregnancy, and Mrs. Frey was bedridden much of her pregnancy for fear of losing the baby, so she only wanted the best for me. I was thankful and was even met with a kiss on my forehead. No anger, no judgment. She was just happy. It was comforting and warm and put me at ease.

She gave me a great big hug. It was one of her famous bear hugs. It was like a trophy to my heart. She was so happy for me and asked for all the information. How far along was I? What size fruit was most comparable to the baby at the moment? Did it have any hair? Any extra toes, a tail, horns? Did I have a name picked out?

I told her that I was due in June if I were lucky, and the pregnancy didn't come to an early end. The only concern was if Nugget would decide to wait that long. That's what I had started calling it rather than giving it a name. Nugget. Ever since I had told her, she had been packing me bigger lunches and prodding me to tell her if it was a boy or girl. She even started giving me lists of names.

Girls: Harriet, Ginger, Victoria, Ester, Bethany, Matilda, Heather, Amanda

Boys: Duncan, Miles, Quinton, Geoff, Clint, Oscar, Ian, Patton

None of these names really sat with me very well... If it were a boy, I presumed Oscar could be a cute name. Patton was also adorable, but I felt it was becoming more common. I knew my baby would be anything other than common, especially not with these circumstances.

After a bit of thought, I knew what I would name Nugget once the time came. It would have to be a surprise for the impact to be full. Still, I couldn't think of any better tribute to the people who had helped me so much in my life and who assisted in me achieving so many goals.

Mrs. Frey even slipped me some of her favorite candy that she kept hidden from her husband to help my cravings. She was a real killer for toffee, and the sweet buttery taste sat well with my stomach when nothing else seemed to.

Mr. Frey wasn't so jovial when I had told him like any good father would be of his daughter in the same situation. He was sitting at the dining table in the early afternoon after talking finance with Anna when I came in to discuss the situation with them. He already had his hands folded, and they were apparently in a serious conversation that was just wrapping up. What better time than when I knew what to expect?

He wanted to know what I planned to do. I told him I wanted to work as long as I could. I wanted to be as productive as possible and make the most of what time I had. I

was saving money up for the time I would need off, the doctor told me only a few weeks, maybe even less.

He wasn't happy. He said I needed as much rest as possible to make sure the baby was big and healthy. I promised him I would be okay, that the activity was safe and healthy, and that I wouldn't want to sit around much anyway. He noted his flashbacks with Anna and said that dropping her on her head when she was born didn't help her much, either. Anna gave him a playful swat and told him to keep his stories to himself. She backed me up and promised that I would be able to take care of myself and my baby so long as I just had a little time.

I showed him the baby bundle I had bought the last time I went out with Anna to town for a shopping spree. I could wear Nugget like a backpack while I was out—women had been doing it for thousands of years. How hard could it be?

He grumbled about it, but after a moment, he smiled at me. He asked me the same questions about when I was due, what the name would be, and if I knew the gender. The more these questions were asked of me, the more excited I got about finding them out for myself. Maybe I should have found out the gender at my last appointment; maybe waiting was a mistake.

Anna had been supporting me and even started going to some of my appointments with me. She wanted to make sure I was taking good care of Nugget and me and wanted to make sure she knew exactly what I needed.

Back on my little trek to the house in the search for a hot drink, the house was so far away... I panted softly. Walking was such a pain in the ass. Swollen feet? Check. Painful legs? Check. No room for my lungs? Extra check. The rain started to come down harder and harder, and I prayed for the days when summer would make the rain cold and the wind less sharp.

Curse the northeast in the spring. The stupid rainy season that sneaks up on you after the blistering cold winters that had no definitive start or stop point. Now it was cold enough to freeze my skin, and I tucked my arms around myself to try to

keep as much heat near my core. I hoped that Nugget was warm, too.

I saw a cab come down the driveway and stop just in front of the house. It was a weird time of day for someone to come to the farm. Had a visitor gone out and was just returning? I hadn't remembered seeing anyone leave.

It was a man, a tall one in a long gray coat that went past his knees. Pretty stylish. He stuck his head into the passenger side of the cab and then darted into the house in a funny little trot, clearly in a hurry. It was obvious he wasn't from the country. I half-heartedly rolled my eyes and continued my march to the kitchen side door.

I watched the man go into the house through the large main door. A few moments passed, and then he came back out, running around the far side of the building toward the stables, the bird yard, and the worker's houses.

Must be after something in the barn, I assumed with an empty thought. I gave it no thought and tried to make my way as quickly as possible into the house, slipping in the side door into the kitchen where Mrs. Frey was brewing a pot of something hot, thank God.

"Oh, sweetheart, what are you doing?" She gasped at me as I came into the room. "You're dripping everywhere. Why were you out in the rain?" With a kitchen towel, she moved a chair over next to the stove where she invited me to sit down.

The towel was used to soak up some water from dripping through my hair. Boy, did the warmth from the stove feel wonderful. It helped to quickly dry me off the rest of the way as I sat and asked what was on the stove.

She poured me a cup of her potion—it was just some black tea and cinnamon and nutmeg simmering in a pot for everyone to take. I wrapped my hands around the cozy warm cup and sighed as it seeped heat into my soul. Once the brew hit about an hour at a simmer, it became a lifeline for most workers in the colder months. Not only did it warm you up, but it tasted deliciously like the holidays or like warm summer nights, however you preferred to look at it.

“What are you making for dinner tonight?” I asked her, hoping for turkey noodle soup. I sipped the drink, even though it was much too hot. I hissed as it burned my lip, but my stomach approved of the tender heat once it made its way into my belly. I wondered if Nugget could feel the warmth and if it enjoyed the extra cozy feeling, too.

“Roast beef, I think. What do you say? Roast beef, mashed potatoes, and a nice big stock of green beans.” She smiled as she was prepping the meat for the oven.

It was already covered in marinade and spices so thick I couldn't see the beef anymore. It smelled fantastic as all the spices were hydrated and soaked into the roast. She already had the potatoes peeled next to the stove, and the green beans were frozen from last year.

Mmm. That would be even better than the soup. She made the best beef I had ever had. No New York chef could compare to her home cooking.

“That sounds delicious,” I said and gave her a nodding smile. I ran a hand through my damp hair to work out any knots that had formed in the locks that weren't trapped in my ponytail.

“Oh, yes, I forgot to tell you. Some fella came in here asking for you. Quick as a bullet, though. I never got to ask him who he was, let alone see his face under his hat.” She wagged a spoon at the kitchen door leading into the central part of the house.

“Me?” I asked her, my curiosity evident. Who the heck could be out in the rain, looking for me like some lunatic? It must have been that man I had seen running around like a chicken with his head cut off.

“Yup, you. I had thought you had gone to rest back at your house, so I sent him that way.”

I pursed my lips in thought. What could a person like that want with me? Unless my family was involved in some new nefarious plot, I hadn't expected to have anyone calling for me there, well. Ever.

“Thanks, Mrs. Frey, I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Take an umbrella on your way out.” She called after me, and I grabbed an umbrella from the container next to the front door, at her direction. I popped the thing open with a snap of my wrist and headed back out into the rain, at least a little bit more prepared that time.

“And who the heck could you be?”

THERE HE WAS. Standing on my porch. The man in gray. I had some time to think on my waddle over that way; the gravel pathways didn’t feel too great on my feet after all. Despite my shoes, I felt like the princess and the pea. It was terrible. Speaking of a pea, I had to. Hopefully, the guy wouldn’t take long; I could barely hold my bladder for more than an hour these days. What with little six-pound Nugget pressing on my bladder, I had no room for anything else in me.

I approached my house, stepping onto the path leading to my porch. I was careful to make my presence known, as not to sneak up on him. Who knew, after all, he could be some weirdo coming to cause trouble at my expense.

“Hello, how can I help you?” I called out to him, trying to sound polite but also still demanding an answer.

The man’s back was to me, and he was facing the door with one hand raised as if to knock or like he already had. His shoulders were shuddering softly, but when he heard me, he stood straight again and looked at me over his shoulder. It was like I was looking at a ghost.

Andre?

Was that really him? That son of a bitch, why the hell would he be at the farm after everything that happened? I felt my face flush instantly, and my chest filled with pain and anger. I clenched my fists, and heat rushed into my head.

“You?” It was all I could say, tilting the umbrella unconsciously enough, so a shot of cold water dripped right

down my back. I lurched a little bit in response. How dare he come back, after making me suffer so much and putting all of it on me. He was a runner. Why in the devil's name had he run back?

"Lillian." Andre turned all the way around. His face was wet. Had he gotten rained on like I had? His hat should've protected him. His eyes were red; was he crying? Those streaks on his cheeks were absolutely tears now that I had a better look at him. "Oh, thank God, Lilly. I didn't think you were here. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know where to go." His voice was shaky and filled with pain. He came off the porch toward me, and I defensively took a step back.

"Why are you here?" I demanded, forcing my strength as much as I could. Did I sound scary? Did I sound dominant? I didn't really think it mattered; I just wanted to know why such a source of misery had returned.

He looked shocked; his gorgeous brown eyes were wide like a struck puppy. He shook the expression away, though, and reached his hands out toward me. "Lillian, please listen to me. I've been so busy and—"

Nothing he could say would change my mind from how he had left to present.

"And what? You've been so busy, so figured some farm girl wasn't enough to care about. You returned to your chrome castle to live out your days. You should've stayed there. What did your business fail so you're running back, thinking I'd have open arms for you a third time?"

He looked hurt. Was I being cruel? I didn't care. Look at me. I was pregnant without any decent options, and it was all because of him. He had left me, not the other way around. I knew what I was undertaking with the baby was going to be foolish and expensive and hard. I was scared, and it was all because of him abandoning us.

"What? Lilly, you don't mean that. Listen, I've been working on—"

I didn't let him get a word in. "Working on what? Ruining someone else's life? Giving them what they thought they always wanted and ripping it away? Is that your new hobby?" I crossed my arms as best I could with the umbrella in one hand. My fists were clenched so hard that I felt my nails dig into the palms of my hands and cause deep furrows in my skin. Any harder, and I'd start bleeding.

"No. Dammit, Lillian, listen." He grabbed me by my shoulders after getting within range and gave me a gentle shake.

I had to raise my umbrella to allow him to come under it.

"I've been doing everything, all of the hard work that's been done back home, I've been doing it for you."

I looked at him; my anger didn't fade. What game was he playing? What hard work did he mean? Of course, I had no idea what he was talking about; I had no contact with anyone back in the city. "What do you mean?" My nose wrinkled in confusion.

"Please, come, let's get out of the rain. It's freaking freezing, please," he pleaded and motioned for me to open the door to the house. "Just go inside and get warm."

I felt one of his strong, thickly muscled arms wrap around my shoulders and gently usher me to unlock the door of my home to go inside.

I couldn't disagree. I unlocked the door with a clunky noise and pushed it open. We both went inside, and I put the umbrella down next to the door to drain. The rain continued to come down and pattered softly against the windowpanes.

"Okay, what?" I demanded again. I went to the kitchen and leaned on the counter. I didn't want him to think that he could get comfortable.

"Lillian, I have been working so hard. I've changed everything for you."

What was he talking about? Himself? Sure, like I'd believe that again. He was out of breath and bug-eyed; it was like he had been waiting months to tell that information to someone.

“Really, I know it sounds stupid, but I redesigned my entire business model. There is no more skyscraper in the city. I was going to wait till maybe the end of the month to start moving out, but then Greg texted me—”

“Greg? Greg told you what? I should’ve known that all of you are the same. All of you are in some sick little clique that can’t stop ruining someone else’s life.” I should have never trusted anyone from William’s group of goons. They were all idiots and made trouble with each other so readily.

“That’s not it, that’s nothing like it. Greg told me that you are um...” He paused. He looked very uncomfortable, but he swallowed hard. Had he just swallowed his own fear? “You’re pregnant.”

I looked down at him as he moved from the entryway of the house to the chair in the living room. All of the heat left my face. Of course, I was pregnant; I may have been wearing a baggy sweatshirt, but my belly button sticking out like a third nipple surely didn’t hide anything. I gave a gentle sigh and rubbed the gap between my eyes. I could already feel a headache coming on.

“Right?” He wanted confirmation. Couldn’t he see me?

“Yes, I’m pregnant.” My answer was curt and concise. What else did he want? It was none of his business.

“And... It’s mine, right? You haven’t been with anyone else, have you?” He looked at me with eyes so filled with hope, but what was he hopeful for? Did he think that I was sleeping around, and that would get him out of child support? I began to feel offended at his insinuation.

If that were the case, he never would have come back; I tried to analyze the situation as much as possible. He could’ve left and stayed gone, yet there he was, like some bad dream. Did he think that I would give up my child? Had he come to plead for some terrible late-term abortion, call me not to give birth to the baby? My hands clenched and flexed, and I scratched my nails against the granite countertop. He came even more into the house and stood on the other side of the counter from me.

“It’s yours, Andre. It’s your baby,” I said softly. I looked down at the counter; my fingers curled over the white countertop.

I had never really considered mothering *Andre’s* child, just my own. We had talked about it when we were younger—did we want a family?

Our families had pressured us into saying yes at that time, but thankfully, we weren’t the early starter types. In college, when I could be myself, I had decided kids weren’t for me. They were expensive, dirty, and time-consuming. What did he think now? I had come to terms with the fact that the decision had been made for me. I let a little bit of myself die the day I got the confirmation. Being a single mother required mostly sacrifice, and I was ready to make it. Was he? Was he really asking so that he could try to take custody of my baby?

“I knew it.” He bounced in his shoes, his fists clenched, and he had a smile as wide as the horizon on his face; I was genuinely shocked. “I knew it, Lilly. I knew you wouldn’t do that to me.” He was so happy... I couldn’t tell if it was genuine, though, and not forced. I hated the fact that I was so skeptical of everything he did. I wanted to believe him, to take him at face value, but it was so hard.

“Okay, so you think I wouldn’t do something to you, but you left me here, Andre. You told me that I had to go back to town. As far as I’m concerned, if you want to have me in your life, and I have to go back to the city to do that, you won’t have Nugget or me.” I nodded with confirmation of my statement. I wouldn’t let any man control me, not again. I wouldn’t let anyone make a decision for me that wasn’t my own.

“You named him Nugget?” One of his thick black eyebrows was sky high at my choice of nickname.

“What? No, no, I don’t know if it’s a boy or a girl yet, so that’s been the placeholder name, you know. It’s just a little nugget.” I was flustered and shook my head at him. “That’s not what we are talking about, Andre. You can’t have us. Go back to the city.”

“There is no more city for me.” He patted his hand proudly on the kitchen counter and took a few steps back, a massive smile on his face. “I made it so every single person on my staff can work from home now, including me. Better yet, I bought a farm for me to live and work on. There is not a single thing tying me to the city anymore.”

Was he serious? Andre was born and raised there, just like we all were. We had never seen the outside of the city except for on the occasional vacation to some foreign country or distant state. I had a hard time believing any part of that.

“You bought a farm? Great, hope you’re happy there.”

“I bought it, just what, fifteen minutes away? I bought it for *you*. I knew you wanted to be near the Rosemary Farm, so I got as close as I could to keeping you here.”

He did what? I felt my color sink away from me. Could I have gotten any whiter without dying and turning into a ghost? I scanned the room for answers to my questions; maybe someone had written them in marker without me knowing. Maybe it all was a joke.

“You bought me a house?” My voice was soft, gentle, quiet.

“Not me, *us*. I bought *us* a house.” He nodded quickly like an energetic school kid.

I didn’t know what to think. He had bought us a house? What, he was going to tell me to go back to the city, and then come back, and suddenly everything would change? I didn’t believe him... I didn’t want to... but still... I was beginning to feel the inkling of hope rise up in my chest again, and that was a dangerous feeling for me.

“Here, look.” He took his phone out of his pocket and swiped through a few different menus. He handed me his device, on it were real estate photos of a listing which was, in fact, very nearby. It had ten acres with fruit trees, an old farmhouse, and a barn on the property, enough for two horses.

The house looked like it was rundown, though. Peeling paint, rotting wood—was that a hole in the roof? Could he be

joking? I admit I didn't know how terrible a person he could be, but I knew he could never survive in a house any less than perfect. He couldn't fit into something like that house; even I would have some trouble despite having experience living on Rosemary Farm.

"I'm having it gutted, currently. It should be done soon; they're making good progress on the work. Greg has been out there every single day to make sure the job is getting done."

Realizing Greg had been involved was a bit of a shocker. Well, maybe he wasn't so bad after all. I guessed that would be why he was there on vacation; he was staying there while accommodating the construction down the road.

"Lilly, I know I was a jerk before, more than a jerk, an asshole." He ran his hand down his face as if to wipe off his exhaustion. "I shouldn't have left on those terms; that was childish and foolish of me. I can never apologize enough."

It was, he wasn't wrong. Nails and heads, they say after all. I flicked my fingers for him to continue.

"But when I left that day, I knew what my goal was, and I knew what I had to do. I knew what the end game was..." he grimaced and looked at my belly. "Admittedly, this part is a little sooner than I had anticipated, but you know what, that's life. And I'm okay with it."

He was making good points... I couldn't believe that he had put so much thought into me, into us, that he had been planning since the day he drove off into the sunset. I rubbed my belly. Maybe he had planned to have children with me all along. I almost blushed at the notion.

I was so lost in my own thoughts that I didn't see him move away from where he was, move across the room toward me, and was only a few feet to my side. Only when he was close enough did I look over at him with a perplexed expression.

He was on one knee, his face aimed at me with so much hope and happiness and pride. I could see all of those golden

emotions plastered on his face like handwriting. What was he doing?

He lifted one hand and opened the top shell of the jewelry box, and inside rested the most gorgeous ring I had ever seen.

It was a massive ring compared to the normal rings women wore today, but it was no boring diamond, well at least not a white one. It was a giant chocolate diamond surrounded by sunny-yellow topazes. It gleamed in the light of my kitchen as if the sun itself were shining down on it.

“Oh, Andre... It’s a sunflower.”

He smiled so brightly he lit up the entire room, well, along with the help of the ring. He was so proud. “Go ahead and take it, try it on. Make sure it fits.” He nudged the little box toward my hand, and I reached out ever so tentatively to take the ring.

I had never imagined myself getting married, other than when we were together when we were younger. Then, of course, I had daydreamed about it as all young women did, but never as an adult. It wasn’t a goal; it was a side quest if anything. I could never imagine such a piece of jewelry being mine.

I took the ring. The flower arrangement on the top was positioned perfectly on a plain gold band. I slid it onto my left ring finger—it fit like a glove. There was a gap between the fixture of the flower and my skin.

“For a wedding band.” He said as I looked at the space. “I mean it, Lilly. I want to marry you.” He cleared his throat and gave me another, smaller smile. “Will you be my wife? Please say yes, you...” he cleared his throat as if trying to stop himself from crying, “You’re the love of my life. I can’t imagine another minute without you.”

My brain went blank.

What did he just say? I could barely string my own thoughts together; his words kept knitting into everything and getting in the way.

I stuttered something, he was still waiting for my response, and his face was so open and hopeful for a positive answer. No

matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find my tongue.

I didn't know if I wanted to give myself completely to him. To be married to the man who broke my heart twice and left me out on the farm to fend for myself with a baby on the way seemed ludicrous. Well, I guess he didn't actually leave me that time. I should have had more faith in him. I should have believed in him...

He said he was working on things, and as I glanced down at the pictures of the house, I looked back over to the man who was asking me to spend the rest of my life with him. My heart flickered with another feeling of warming emotion. My eyes prickled with the onset of tears.

“Yes.”

He stood and lunged at me, wrapping his arms around me and hugging me tightly to him. He was laughing. Had I ever heard him so happy? He hugged me so tightly, and my arms went up to hug him back. Admittedly, I did start to feel a bit better.

“You mean it? Do you promise? You'll marry me?” He seemed like a school kid; he was even more handsome than when he was smoldering. He grabbed my hands and shook them both softly; I could feel him gently touching the ring on my hand.

“Yes, I mean it. I'm sorry I doubted you...” I felt my eyes start to betray me again, and I started to cry.

He wiped my tears away with his thumbs as he held my face in his hands, and he moved forward to leave the softest kiss on the tip of my nose. “Don't be sorry. Don't apologize. You didn't know, look at you, your situation. How could you not?” He kissed my forehead ever so softly. “I'm sorry I allowed you to think about those things. I should've worked harder and faster to get the results I needed to come to get you again.”

He separated from me and looked down into my damp eyes. “I really am sorry, Lilly. I knew exactly who I wanted to

be for you that day back in the barn. I knew you were my everything despite our differences.”

I was so touched, the ring fit so well on my finger, and I studied the gemstones. The diamond was cut with so many angles that it made it look as if it had countless seeds, just like a real flower. The topazes were shaped and secured around the center stone in a way that it looked like a thousand petals. I was really blown away by the entire display. I looked back up at him and quickly planted the most delicate of kisses on his lips, which seemed to surprise him pleasantly.

“I’m sorry I doubted you,” I said softly. “I thought through our past that things were always meant to end terribly between us.” I rubbed the back of my hand across my eyes, and I couldn’t help but smile. I was feeling so much relief. I wouldn’t have to do all of it alone. I wouldn’t have to be a single mother. I wouldn’t have to figure out how to afford everything for the birth and a baby; I could feel the stress melting away.

“I knew that you had changed after a few weeks at the farm; you had become so sweet and kind and thoughtful.”

He ran his fingers through my hair, rewarding my words with the most gentle of smiles. “Thank you for believing in me.”

COME LATE SPRING, Andre helped me move my belongings to the new home. It did look so much better than it had in the listing photos, thank goodness. Greg had made sure all the changes that needed to be made were completed, and living would be comfortable for us while the baby was getting ready to come.

The siding was bright yellow and warm, and all trimmings were white and clean. The roof was a warm brown to contrast all of the bright colors. It looked like such a pleasant and positive home, something so comfy and cozy, it looked as if it could invite anyone into the giant double-hung front door.

The landscaping had developed perfectly. Andre had the front of the home decorated with hydrangea bushes that, after the time he took to reveal the location to me, had already bloomed. They were a mix of pinks and blues and purples and contrasted the colors of the home magnificently. Bees bumbled gently through the flowers, and butterflies flitted from plant to plant lazily in the late spring sun.

A massive walnut tree overhung the house. It helped to keep the building cool in the summer, adding soft breezes through the home, and warmth in the winter when the leaves would fall and allow the sun to reach in and kiss the roof. It was absolutely comfortable and seemed to be the perfect little farmhouse for us.

There was a fenced-in backyard around. A deck off the back was decorated with a large table and an awning that blocked the sun and rain if desired. There were flat flagstone pathways all throughout the property to get from one place to another.

What had surprised me the most on the day that I moved in is that he had salvaged the old barns.

The beams were strong and stocky—the old kind that came from ancient trees at the turn of the century and was valued by woodworkers for their weathered properties. He had them repainted with protective red paint. Upon inspection, the improved barn was large enough to house up to three horses now—though two would be more comfortable. I couldn't wait to get someone to move into the barn. Who would I have? A large quarter horse? Maybe the barn would be where I sent Andre when he wasn't on his best behavior.

Andre knew I loved the horses at Rosemary Farm and wanted me to have that love there, too.

The house opened up into a bright and airy living room filled with natural light and windows. There was a greystone fireplace that could keep the living room warm and cozy during the winter.

The kitchen was large and farm-house styled. Andre had stocked it with everything we would need so that shopping

wouldn't have to be done—for the exception of fresh ingredients—for months.

He said he never wanted me to stress again, want for nothing, especially during the end of my pregnancy and just after birth—that meant no need for shopping. He would have someone come to help clean the house and even cook the food if I wanted it. I did learn that Mrs. Frey had also offered to come over once in a while to help out, as well as send me some goodie bags of fresh cooking filled with love to help get us through some time.

The dining room had a table large enough to seat ten people. Apparently, it was the original left behind by the original owners. It was covered in ornate carvings of horses and horseshoes, and even the feet of the table were carved to look like horse feet.

Our bedroom was the biggest room upstairs and even had bay windows overlooking the backyard and created a reading nook indoors. He had a special place filled with sun for all of my beautiful little plants to sit. I could finally have as many as I wanted—no size limit in sight—which was great because my tiny home back on Rosemary Farm was starting to feel more like a greenhouse rather than a place to live. I had hoped that meant it was healthier, but really it just meant that I kept bumping into stuff at every turn or move.

Finally, on our initial tour, he opened up the room across the open hall from our bedroom and into a beautiful green baby nursery. It had a white crib with a dinosaur-themed pad, there were little pieces of furniture all around, and an ultrasoft rocker for nursing was in the corner to catch the winter sun. There were bookcases filled with toddler books, ones about the alphabet, counting, playing. Some were decorated with animals, others in clouds or food. On the floor in the room on top of the original hardwood floor was a giant rug in the shape of a dinosaur, its long neck curling around a portion of the room.

“I hope you like it,” he said as we stood in the doorway to the nursery.

I was holding my now-enormous stomach. It had taken just a bit longer for the contractors to finish the needed work, and thankfully it felt as if we had gotten in just in time. I was due to pop any day now, and Nugget was no longer moving due to the lack of room it had for dancing and what felt like punching me in my bladder day after day. I rubbed it gently, and as I looked in the room. One of Andre's arms came around me and rubbed my belly as well over my T-shirt.

He bent over and kissed the corner of my neck and shoulder gently, and I separated from him to pace around the room. "It really is adorable," I said softly.

The gender of our baby was still a secret, but Andre had attended every appointment since reuniting with me. He also wanted it to be a surprise for us.

We had waited that long, why spoil it now?

Only a week later, the contractors had the backyard fully decorated. I was amazed at the speed at which they worked. Still, once I noticed Gregory watching over everything and making sure the workers were keeping to the task, I knew that we were in good hands.

Andre wanted to get married at home. Not in some immensely expensive venue. An archway was installed that I insisted we keep after the wedding was over to plant grapevines on. He agreed, of course. I was so excited. I picked out my dress at a local shop rather than at some massive bridal boutique—Andre assumed I would do that and was apparently very proud of knowing me so well. He had told me about the tribulations he was under to have a backyard wedding. Everyone was pressuring him to have it at a venue, but he knew I would rather something smaller and more intimate. He was right; I couldn't deny it.

Flowers were planted everywhere, and twelve benches were set outside, six on either side.

Andre invited bits and pieces of his own family, Gregory and Anna were, of course there, and Mr. and Mrs. Frey had taken the spot of my parents in the ceremony. Some of my

friends from back at the farm had come, and all-in-all we were happy with the choices we had made in guests.

When I walked down the aisle in my dress, fitted to show off my stomach, I finally felt as if I was where I belonged. No more did I have that same feeling of stress, emptiness, guilt, loneliness, and Andre admitted that his missing piece was filled. He even included that in his vows. I finally felt comfortable. I felt safe and loved and cherished. It was what I had always wanted my life to be, and I had no idea that it would come about that way.

Our kiss was perfect, and my wedding band had three stones in it—a blue stone for me, a black stone for him, and a little green stone right in the middle for Nugget. Our hearts were full, and so soon would be our hands, but neither of us could be happier.

We both knew, at that moment, under the arch as we combined our lives into one, that it was our happily ever after.

The wedding lasted all day and well into the night. I partied in my oversized shoes with Andre at my hip, and we enjoyed every single bit of it. Some people mentioned that they felt bad for me that I couldn't partake in the drinks, but that was fine. I enjoyed the presence of my lover and my family, which was more than enough for me.

Epilogue

LILLIAN

“Andre, get the candles from the basement. Check the holiday box,” I called out to him. I had no idea where he was, but I needed him to help as soon as he could. Everyone would be there soon.

I was busy slamming kitchen cupboards, trying to find everything that I needed together to make the day as special as possible for the most special person in our lives.

“What do you think, Nugget. Do you think Daddy will find the candles?” I turned to the highchair where our beautiful baby girl was strapped in and enjoying a bowl of applesauce, except it was all over her face and even swiped up into her hair.

She looked especially proud, and I couldn’t help but give her a smile that was met with squeaks and squeals.

“Now, now, now, Robin,” I wiped her clean with a damp kitchen cloth, “you can make a mess when we get this cake in front of you but not until everyone is here. Got it?” I wiped the corner of the wet cloth on her nose and gave it a gentle pinch.

She cooed, her bright blue eyes sparkled as I scrubbed applesauce from her pitch-black hair. She was a chubby little thing who enjoyed all of the fresh produce we were able to buy from Rosemary Farm just down the road and was the happiest person I had ever seen. Andre worked hard as a father and made sure she was entertained continuously. Robin was learning and growing so quickly, and we eagerly anticipated her first words coming soon. We had a running bet on if it

would be mommy or daddy, but we would be happy no matter what the outcome was.

“Here we go.” Andre popped himself up from the basement and slid the candles across from the table to me. He closed the door behind him with a gentle click of the latch and turned off the light behind him.

“Wonderful, thank you so much, sweetheart. Hey, can you hang out with her for a moment while I go make sure the horses have their morning oats?” Andre was already taking Robin out of the chair and tossing her ever so slightly in the air—met only with drool and laughter.

“If that’s my reward for the candles, I’ll take it.” He pretended to eat her cheeks while I slipped out the side door of the kitchen, the screen slamming behind me, and pranced down the flagstone path toward the field behind the house.

A familiar face popped out from the stall window and gave me a frustrated whinny. She had been very patient to be let out all morning, but finally, enough was enough. She was pawing at the door to her stall, which would lead her out to the clover fields.

“I know, I know, Blotches, I’m sorry. I was busy baking a cake.” She didn’t seem to appreciate my excuse; when I opened her door, she flung herself into the pasture in pursuit of sweet clover to make up for her lack of molasses oats. Her braids flowed behind her, and as I watched her perfect form, she looked like she could be a statue or a hallucination.

She was already an older horse last year, not working on Rosemary Farm, more or less there to assist with training and emotional support of the other horses. Mr. Frey had gifted her to me as a wedding present, and on that day, my heart had nearly melted. She seemed so content, as if on a constant vacation. Only recently did she start to show her age in her step, every once in a while on cold nights, she would limp come next morning, but who could blame her? I had a hard time dealing with cold air, too; it was uncomfortable. She eventually returned to give me a nibble on the shoulder as a good morning greeting and an urge to refill her food bucket.

I scooped some oats into her bucket and looked over into her neighboring stall where a sweet little donkey, Milo, was busy rolling in the soft hay, more interested in staying in the cool shade than loping into the intense fall sunshine of the northeast.

“Oh, you little bugger.” I shooed him with a flop to his backside of a handful of straw. “Get on out there and get some fresh grass.”

Finally, after some coaxing, he left his stall and followed Blotches around to find the best green treats. The two got along swimmingly. He was like a little kid, ornery and stubborn with a will to do everything he was told not to do. She gave him a lot of boundaries and made sure he didn't get into too much trouble if she could help it, except the one time he squirmed his fat little butt out of a broken fence railing and got himself stuck in the raspberry patch down the road. He was tempted by the sweet berries but trapped by the pricking thorns.

After making sure the barn was set for the day, I heard a car roar up into the driveway. Actually, it was a large, black, double-axel pickup truck with a logo on the side that I could barely read but knew who it was instinctively. I washed my hands in the sink attached to the pump at the barn, where I refilled the horse buckets and dried them on an old slop towel next to the basin.

“Ah, you're here early....” I said to myself as I trotted back into the house, making sure to close the fence gate securely after me, less Milo figured he could follow me and find treats in the vegetable garden. I heard the front screen door slam as the guest was already in the house.

“How are you?” Andre asked Greg as he was making his way into the kitchen. I could hear their voices clear as day through all of the open windows that allowed a luxuriously soft breeze to pass freely through the home.

“Ah, great man, congratulations on one year with his little rug rat.”

I saw him kneel to meet Robin, who Andre had left on the kitchen floor to make trouble with a pile of tea towels he had given to her to play with. One was already soaked with drool. She gave him a large smile as he flicked her tiny button nose and giggles ensued.

Anna rounded the corner after Greg, holding a big tray covered in tinfoil. “Don’t forget me,” she sang happily as she slid the tray onto the counter. “Fresh cookies and fruit pockets from Momma, since when has anyone had a birthday without them?” She seemed pleasantly happy, but what had she been doing with Greg? I had never known either of them to be very close to one another. Had they come together?

“Hello, everyone,” I exclaimed as I came entirely into the kitchen from where I was observing everyone, and I was greeted with a round of hellos. “I didn’t know you both were coming together?”

Anna seemed to shuffle a bit nervously, but she shrugged gently. “Ah, well, gas is expensive. Plus, Dad had his truck out in the field for picking something or another.” She was bluffing that much was obvious.

“Well, I am just glad you could make it; thank you both.” They also had both set two bags filled with colorful paper on the floor next to the dining room table. Andre moved Robin’s highchair over at the head of the table for the birthday girl.

“How is Robin?” Greg asked, had I ever heard anyone refer to Mrs. Frey by her first name? That was, after all, where I had gotten the inspiration for our daughter’s name. If she were a boy, her name would have been Franklin to match Mr. Frey; it was the least I could do to show my appreciation for all of the love they had given me. We were family, and I wanted our love to stay in the family.

“Oh, she’s lovely, you know. You can’t slow her down even at her age. If she isn’t cooking, she’s cleaning. If she isn’t cleaning, she’s creating trouble somewhere on the farm.” Everyone gave a gentle chuckle as we all knew the type of mischief she liked to get into—slipping treats to workers and putting cookies in Mr. Frey’s pockets when he wasn’t looking.

I set the chocolate cake in front of the baby, just out of reach, as I poked a few candles on the top. With a flick of his wrist, Andre leaned over with a stick lighter, and the candle glowed perfectly. Everyone gathered around in front of Robin after I stuck her back into her highchair. Usually, that would be a case of treason to her, but now with the cake as her main objective, she was doing anything she could to get closer to it.

Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday, dear Robin, happy birthday to you.

Robbin was smitten. She smiled and laughed at everyone signing, and Anna made faces at her as she took as many pictures as possible on her phone for us. With a few tweets and twitters, she forwarded the pictures to me so I could stick them in a scrapbook.

“What a year.” She cheered as Robin clasped her little hands at the cake.

Andre made sure she couldn’t reach for fear of the fire.

“You’re telling me...” I said, faking exhaustion.

Things weren’t actually all that bad, and I knew that. Andre’s business had gotten so much good press as an “employee-friendly” place to work that he attracted top skill, which had only increased profits.

He had saved millions of dollars by not having that massive building in the middle of the city and even made an enormous chunk of money, something like 1.2 billion dollars, by selling the building itself. I had asked him one day when we were having a quiet, snowy evening if he regretted leaving the city, and he took a while to answer me, so long that I started to get nervous.

My delivery had been easy as well, labor lasted about six hours, and I was able to do most of it at home. We were only a short drive from the nearest hospital, and Andre was so supportive, he made sure that I was comfortable every step of the way. I decided to have as natural as possible birth and declined pain medication and epidurals. When Robin finally arrived, I was exhausted, but her little screams and cries filled

me with so much life and love. I knew that no matter what she wanted, I would get it for her. Andre promised the same. If there were anything she needed, she would have it.

“I never thought it was possible to be this happy,” he finally said, holding our little girl in his arms when she was only just big enough to hold her head up.

Robin was a good mix between us with my light eyes and his darker features.

“Never in my life did I think I would want to live away from civilization, and I would absolutely never have considered that the simplicity could be so... well... so good.” We had a good laugh, and we both agreed that this was most likely our combining of souls, two pieces of the same puzzle, completely in love.

Now I looked around the room and saw all of my friends enjoying the first birthday of our daughter. We were still as happy as ever.

Andre blew out the candle for Robin, and she seemed a bit frustrated at the lack of light, though this quickly passed as he nudged the now baby-safe cake toward her. One gentle, curious hand reached out and touched the icing, enjoying that it gave under her finger.

She gripped a chunk of it and squealed in delight as she came away with soft chocolate cake. She shoved the fistful into her mouth.

Greg chuckled as she quickly became covered in icing and crumbs. “Looks like someone’s getting a bath tonight. You’re lucky she’s still small enough to fit in the sink.”

I laughed and combed my fingers through her baby-soft hair. “You have that right, thank goodness, no broken backs yet.”

We all enjoyed watching Robin, the light of my life and the fullness of my own and Andre’s heart, cover herself from head to toe and all in between with the cake and icing, smiling the entire time.

Billionaire's Fake Marriage



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