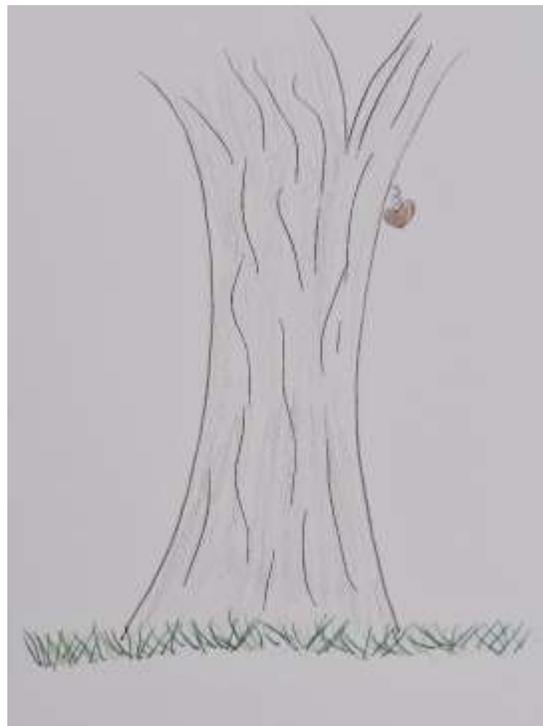




How Much Can You Love

Cheryl is about to get married in the most picturesque place she knows of, her family's estate. The only thing to make the weekend better is to have Trudy, her best friend, come to join her. Trudy brings with her a love for life and her surroundings like no other. Her brand of love, life and all things good is contagious. However, when sadness threatens to ruin the day, Trudy's secret admirer will work things out for her, only she doesn't know this yet.



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“Whatever you do, you can’t tell Trudy Daddy, you promised,” Cheryl reminds him.

“I heard you a million times,” he says annoyed.

“Daddy, look at me,” he turns to look at his daughter’s demanding eyes. He is pulled in and he can’t look away.

“Trudy is everything to me Daddy. She is the one who taught me how to live after my mother spent a lifetime telling me when to breathe in and when to breathe out. I was not alive until you let me go to the college of my choice. Then I was reborn when I met Trudy. She took this soulless gal and turned her into someone I can now look in the mirror and be proud to say I know the person in my reflection. I’ve become something in my own right. An engineer, I mean who would have thought I could love math so much? The only numbers Mother taught me had to do with making a party or a shopping list. I’m sure she meant well, but she had no life and she dragged me into a soulless life as well. Trudy brought me out. She can smell bad news, you can’t tell her Daddy. I want her aura bright and fun for the next couple of days, after the wedding, you can tell her if you want. If you can tie her down long enough to have a serious conversation that is.” Cheryl says with concern.

“So, why the hell are all these snobs coming as bride’s maids?” another voice from behind her asks.

“Oh, hi love,” she leans over and kisses her favorite cousin in the whole world. “I need her to breathe life into the doldrums these other women are likely to bring. They called me as soon as they heard I was engaged and basically told me they are ready to be there for me on my special day. I never officially invited them, but its giving my mother something to do, so it’s not all bad, is it? But Trudy, she is my one true maid of honor and all around best friend ever. We will be rooming together in my suite. I’m sure she will have me up as early as 7:00am, the other girls won’t be up before a respectable 9:00,” she says with an air of snobbery in her voice.

“In those first two hours of the morning, anything can happen and I’m counting on it to happen as well. That’s why you are around. To capture all of the wonder on your magical camera, my dear cousin. That, and I want you to join us for meals and all the fun group activities. Maybe you’ll meet someone you like?” she smirks at him knowing the truth, she knows exactly where his heart lies.

“Ahhh, no, my dear Cheryl. I am not here to be matched up especially since you so willingly gave all your court such glowing reviews. No, I will assume the role of paparazzi and stay behind the lens. Although if something looks of interest to me at the meals, you can be sure I will be eating. Are you having respectable food, or real food?” he asks, laughing.

“Oh, only real food. I can’t eat finger sandwiches for three days. Heavens no. I want corn beef sandwiches, lasagna, and chicken cutlets along with all the roasted vegies Cook can come up with. Trudy also taught me how to enjoy food and still stay healthy. Oh Daddy, I can’t wait for her to be here, how about you?” she asks excitedly.

“You know I love Trudy, from the first moment you brought her home freshman year. But your mother, is not a fan, are you sure she will deal with her shenanigans while being here? And before your big day no less,” he asks cautiously.



“Oh, I told Mother already that the next couple of days are for me to enjoy my friends any way I want to. I also told her if she tried to micromanage any of the activities I have planned, or cancel any of them or even alter them in any way, then she would be seated in a pew in the front row like a guest at the ceremony and that you will be the only one to walk me down the aisle. I reminded her whose estate this was and told her she is a guest as much as the girls are and she should play the good guest and follow the schedule that will be provided in her room,” Cheryl smiles remembering the look on her astonished mother’s face. Trudy had also taught her how to have a backbone and stick up for what she really wants, and she wants a fun time before the wedding on the estate.

“Bravo, my dear. You hear that my nephew? Cheryl here has finally put her mother in her place. About damn time,” he says with a smile and gives her a kiss on the cheek.

Donovan loved his wife at one time. He even enjoyed being with her on many of her ‘gatherings’, as she used to call them, in the early part of their marriage. However, when he watched his girls turn into young women, he didn’t like the women they were headed to become. He put his foot down. His wife had their life set out as if they had no purpose other than to be a wife and socialite, did his wife really have no other identity? He had thought to himself. How had he never noticed that, how sad for her. That was not going to do for his daughters though. So, he sent Cheryl off to college, where she grew up more in one semester with Trudy than she did in all the years at home under his wife’s influence.

His oldest son is soon to be finishing medical school, the next one decided to become a photographer, much to his mother’s chagrin. He is a photo journalist and has been published in many famous magazines but he won’t give his mother the pleasure of knowing when and where his photographs are featured. He is too upset that she chose to snub him with his chosen profession to all her friends, as if he is a curse on the family name. Therefore, she does not get to enjoy in his successes. Donovan is proud of his sons. They have done well. Now Cheryl will be working at an engineering firm while her husband Calvin will be first headed to his graduate program in medical research. Maybe he will come up with the cure for what ails him, at least for the next guy. His youngest is in her second year of college now, far away from home. She has always been his princess, because she always reminded him of the princesses in their bedtime stories, happy and full of life.

His nephew, his sister’s only child, has also chosen to become a photographer, but he wants to take pictures of people, not events like a journalist has to do. His sister was not happy at first and pleaded with Donovan to talk to her son. He did, his nephew has a plan, a direction, and the will to make his photography work. Plus, he has the talent. When he explained this to his sister, she hugged him and thanked him for being the father, the boy didn’t have. When Donovan’s sister filed for divorce, she thought it was going to be the end of the life she knew. Instead she was able to make a new life, she credits her brother with being her guiding light in this.

Since then, she has actually begun to live for the first time. His nephew is happy to watch his mother blossom and become her own person. He continues to thank Donovan for his hand in his mother’s happiness. Donovan only pointed out what she was missing in her life and what she



had always wanted to have. Upon recognizing that, his sister went to talk to a lawyer to see what she needed to do.

Looking around, Donovan realizes that he is one very lucky man. Though some of his wealth, this estate for example, came directly from his father, Donovan has done well for himself in his own right. Despite having many tragedies and losses within his family, Donovan has made his life picture perfect with the help of his brother Cade. He is reminded of that every time they visit this estate. The grounds are beautiful, the housing plentiful and tastefully done in simple furniture, nothing extravagant. His mother wouldn’t allow anything fancy. Only simple beauty, she would tell him, and this is how he has kept the place. The estate had to meld with nature not the other way around these were her only rules.

He is not long in this world, but for as long as he has, he will stay on the estate. He has not lived in the same home as his wife in many years already. He won’t divorce her because, for his wife, it would be the worst scandal possible. But, as a widow, he thinks, she can play up for the rest of her life if she wants. Donovan provided for her nicely in his Will, but the rest of what he has, all goes to his kids. This estate, goes to Cheryl, it’s all she wants. Nothing else matters to her. The boys will be getting what they need and so will his princess. Maybe he will live longer than predicted, you never know, they say there is no way to tell. Right now, he still doesn’t even show any outward signs of the illness.

“Daddy? Daddy! I’ve been calling you, where did you go?” Cheryl asks with concern.

“I’m ok baby girl, memories keep me silent. I’m sorry. What did you ask me?” he asks.

“First of all, I’m not your baby girl; that would be Abby. But now that you are back with me, I was asking you how the groomsmen intend on keeping to their side of the estate so I don’t see Calvin before the wedding?” she looks at him still concerned for him.

“Don’t give me that look. I’m fine, really, I am. I was thinking of how proud I am of you and all that you’ve accomplished, all my children actually. Calvin’s side, by the way, arrive here at noon today and will be keeping the menfolk to their side of the estate, your brothers too, all those involved over there will stay there. Calvin’s parents will stay over there as well so that they can enjoy him privately while there are group activities between both parties. I believe he has some cousins coming over tomorrow night as well to hang out and have fun.

Now, look at the time. Its nearly 8:30 and Trudy will be here by 9:00 if the flight is on time. Now go, shoo, get ready,” he pushes her out of his office and she runs like an excited school girl.

“Uncle Donovan, you sure you’re ok?” the nephew asks putting a hand on his shoulder. They have always had an honest relationship.

“I am fine, really I am. Sometimes I get lost in thought is all, unfortunately for me, Cheryl is usually around when that happens so she gets worried. It’s going to take years before this takes me down, I’ve got plenty of time to enjoy the estate. I hope you will join me now and again,” Donovan smiles.

Donovan turns to stare out the window now. His nephew taps his shoulder, “I’m going to get ready for the furry known as Trudy,” he smiles, Donovan laughs. Little does anyone know why he is actually smiling though. He knows his nephew’s true heart. No one had to tell him, he can see love in his eyes like his mother used to tell him about. Always look in the eyes, where are they



and how wide they are open. He can see and he is hoping he will see something happen this weekend.

~ ~ ~

Cheryl is her best friend. Trudy has always known that her friend had a lot of money but never realized how much until she received the invitation to come to an estate for pre-wedding festivities. She is flying first class, courtesy of Cheryl’s father. Her first and probably last time for this. Something to be said for these cushy seats though.

Trudy met the stuffed shirt known as Cheryl almost their first day of college. She saw a raw potential there and she molded her and brought her out of the society shell she was under and brought her into a world of fabulous possibilities. Trudy is a free spirit, she does what she wants when she wants to, assuming she has no obligations, like when she had to attend class, no, that she never missed.

College was a gift she received through scholarships and some loans. She wasn’t going to waste time like some kids did. No, she and her friends, they studied hard, but she also reminded them they have to live life outside their books. Trudy is the one who organized camping trips, hikes, boat rides, and even snowball fights on the campus. She organized the group to all go skydiving when the last of them turned twenty-one. Cheryl had been scared out of her mind, but she and Calvin did that one together. They have been together ever since.

Trudy had dates in college but never a real boyfriend. She had Cheryl though and that brought her great enjoyment. She told her mom about the stuffed shirt that she converted into being a part of real life. Her mom laughed and laughed. Over the next couple of years, the girls spent various holidays, vacations and/or weekends at each other’s parent’s homes. Going to Cheryl always meant she would see her cousin who hung out there all the time, her brothers who were rarely, however, there was a cousin she enjoyed seeing all the time, but the worst of them all, was Cheryl’s mother. Cheryl’s mother did not approve of Trudy and Trudy did not give her any of her mind, in fact, she usually ignored the woman even when spoken to directly because what she said was usually something snobby or condescending.

Trudy loves life, she embraces everything around her. Nature, by far, fascinates her, so with her passion, she became a zoologist with a minor in botany and she is now working two different jobs. One at a nature preserve and the other is at a small children’s zoo not too far from where they went to school.

The next couple of days are about Cheryl, and keeping her from getting cold feet. Trudy asked what was on the estate and Cheryl told her all there was to do; Trudy plans on doing as much as she can. She managed to pack all her clothes in a carry on, she did not have to worry about the wedding dresses because those were being pressed and delivered directly to the estate.

No other fancy clothes needed, she took the barest of essentials. She will be there only three days, how much do you need? Cheryl told her that some of her other relatives will be there and a couple of obligatory friends will be there, none of which are from the same background as Trudy. In other words, they are all snobs but she assured Trudy, that she has full reign of the activities.

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Trudy walks off the plane and sees a man holding a card with her name on it. She walks up to him, “I’m Trudy,” she says.

“Welcome Ms. Trudy. I trust your travel went well?” he asks.

“Um, sure. Are you here to drive me to the estate?” she asks.

“Yes, Ms. We will go wait for your baggage to arrive then I will get the car,” he says.

“Well, you had better go get the car sir, because this is all I have,” she holds up her carry on.

Trying not to show his shock, he says, “Very well. If you will follow me,” he didn’t dare take the small suitcase because he had the distinct feeling that she would not let him. When he pulls the car up, Trudy throws her suitcase in the back seat and proceeds to sit down in the front passenger seat. She will not be chauffeured, not even for Cheryl.

He smiles, “Ms. Trudy. I like you already,” he says as he begins to drive away. “You can call me Trever. I’ve been working at the estate for many years. It’s a magical place. My number on the estate is extension 666,” he smiles at her.

All is not lost on Trudy, she begins to laugh, and so does Trever. They talk and joke all the way to the estate. As he turns into the compound Trudy suddenly becomes quiet. This is not an estate. This is a whole village onto itself. Oh my, Trudy thinks to herself as they pass a small pond, “Can you swim in there?” she asks.

“This pond divides the estate. It was here back when the grounds were first bought and the original owner, Cheryl’s father’s father, kept it as is. For the next couple of days, the groom and his party will be staying on the far side of the estate so that you will not worry about accidentally running into them.

They have all the same amenities as you will have, except one. The stables and horses are on this side. Ms. Cheryl loves the horses. There are tennis courts, handball courts, croquet sets, horseshoe sets and even bocce ball,” he continues.

“Excuse me, Trever, but I don’t even know what any of those are, ok tennis I know and I certainly know horses. But the rest? Won’t be on the agenda. No, we will be hiking over there to the left to discover what is in that wooded area, we will be having water balloon fights, a great game of soccer and maybe even a touch football game, girls against boys, what do you think?” she asks.

“I would assume the men will like that, Ms. Cheryl will go, many of her other women may not though. Being honest, sorry,” he says.

“No worries, we will have fun without them. Besides, it’s more fun getting all the guys’ attention anyway,” she laughs and so does Trever. This will be an interesting couple of days, he thinks to himself. “Oh, and Ms. Trudy, I can rustle up some equipment for any game you may need. You contact old Trever here. I will make sure the fun happens. How about a midnight bar b que? We haven’t had one of those since Ms. Cheryl was a young girl,” he says looking at his passenger with a smile.

“I like the way you think Trever, ok. Let’s do one. I’m game and bring plenty of blankets to sit on the hill over there with, stargazing at midnight must be amazing around here. She leans over and kisses him on the cheek.



They are about to pull up to the house when Trudy says, "Oh God!! Stop the car," he does and she jumps out and starts running across the grass. Trever watches where she is running to. Oh, oh my, she is headed towards the wild horse that likes to visit. He watches as she runs more. Ms. Cheryl comes running out, "Oh Trever why didn't you stop her?" she says.

"Trudy!" she calls and begins to run.

Donovan and his nephew run as well. They can't catch her and she can't hear them. As they get closer to her, she waves them back, they stop where they are and watch.

"Oh my, look at you," Trudy says softly as she approaches the horse. He is black as black can be, not a single hair is any other color. His hooves are black, his mane and tail are long and wavy. "You don't belong here, do you? Or maybe you do?" she says in a soft voice.

The horse looks towards her and she gasps, "Hello to you to," she says looking in his eye. Cheryl and Donovan have already called the stable workers to come by with a rope, in case of necessity. "Oh Trudy, you haven't been here five minutes," Cheryl says in fear. They watch from afar too afraid to get close and spook the horse. He has them all mesmerized. He is beautiful they can all agree on that.

Trudy looks at his face, she puts her hand in her pocket and pulls out a sugar cube. "Come on baby, come take the sugar cube. You will love the taste," she whispers to him. Trudy is in awe of this creature.

"What the hell is she doing?" Trever asks, having caught up to them.

"Trudy loves sugar cubes, it's her favorite candy. She probably had one in her pocket and is giving one to him. Her spirit is calming to him, look. This is why she is here Daddy, she will bring spirit back to this place, you will see. Watch. Oh my," Cheryl says as they watch the wild horse take the sugar cube straight from Trudy's hand.

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"Well, I'll be. I can't say I've ever seen that happen before," Donovan says softly. The stable manager is right next to them. "Me either boss, me either," he says.

The horse bows its head and Trudy pets him. She rubs him from his forehead to his nose and the horse stays there. He blows air on her once, twice. "Ahhhh, I hear you. You are a free spirit aren't you but you like people. Want another?" she asks.

The horse steps back a moment and she reaches in her pocket and pulls out another sugar cube. She holds her hand out to him. He takes the sugar cube, then takes another step back and turns to its right to walk away, but before he does, he stands up on his hind legs to his fullest height, what a magnificent creature, she thinks to herself. I will ride you before I leave, I promise you that. She thinks to herself again.

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The horse comes down then trots off and builds quickly to a run. At this point, the others run towards Trudy, "Trudy!!!!" Cheryl calls to her.

Finally, Trudy turns to see her friend. "Oh my, did you see that creature?! I have never seen a more magnificent horse in my life. He is so dark, his eyes pull you in. He has a wild spirit in

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him, but he loves humans. He is not fully wild. I formed a theory already, someone owned him at some point but couldn’t control him. You can’t control his spirit, you have to embrace him and he will stay around this estate. I promise you that. Respect him and he will do the same,” she says almost breathless to her friend.

“Trudy my dear, you had us all a bit scared there though. What if he wasn’t at all tame?” Donovan asks.

“I would have known not to offer the sugar cube, Mr. Donovan, sometimes I can feel spirits. This horse belongs here. I promise you that. How long has he been hanging around?” she looks to the other older gentleman he sees there.

“Oh, I’d say about the past few months, shows up, grazes here and there. He is a sneaky one too, so stealth. I almost jumped out of my skin one day when I turned to see him only a few feet behind me. He stared right at me, like he did you,” he says

“Ahhhh, he trusts you then. That’s a good sign. He will be back. I hope it’s while I’m here.” She turns to her friend, “We’re getting married!” she screams and the two girls go off as if nothing happened, babbling on about the plans and everything from having coffee to a swim in the pond.

“Trudy is amazing,” a voice from behind says.

Donovan smiles at his nephew, he puts a hand on his shoulder, “Yes, yes she is my son.” The two of them walk back towards the house together and the stable manager stands there, still staring at the spot where the horse was. He is a magnificent beast that is for sure, he thinks to himself shaking his head as he heads back to the stables.

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Trever is true to his word, he managed to convince the cook that a midnight bar b que is what everyone wants. Proud of himself, he comes to find Trudy and Cheryl to tell them. Trudy jumps into his arms and gives him another kiss on the cheek, both of them actually. He is going to enjoy having this young woman here for a couple days. Shake things up a bit. The place needs someone like her once in a while, needs someone to appreciate all that the place has to offer.

Cheryl is the only other person who loves this place with true abandonment. Donovan appreciates it, but his girls? They breathe the estate and he wants to do everything in his power to allow them to do so. Trever knows Donovan won’t be around to watch Cheryl transform the place back into life, so the least he can do is make sure he sees all the life that they will bring back in the next couple of days.

“A midnight bar b que? Trudy, how perfect. The last of the guests are getting here around 10:00pm tonight. It’s simply perfect. We will have it out on the greens where we were this morning Trever, it’s the only place that has good lighting and don’t forget to bring.”

“The blankets,” Trudy and Trever say in unison. The three of them laugh as they see all minds are on the same thing. “Can we get some music playing as well? Not dancing music, but background music.” Cheryl looks to Trever.

“Music? I like the idea. Ok. I’ll see what I can find. Will your lady friends be joining you? Cook wants to know how many to cook for,” he says.

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“HA! If they do come, do you think they are eating at that hour? There are eight guys who will be there and I’m sure someone will bring some food back to Calvin and his dad, they love bar b que food.”

“Fair enough, let me go tell him now so he can get prepared. Lunch will be served on the terrace in the back. Some of your guests are already here Cheryl, you may want to greet them, they are in the library I believe,” he says firmly.

“Ok Trever, we’ll go now. Thank you,” she says looking over at Trudy who wants nothing to do with her snobby friends. She wants to go explore the estate. You could live here with a hundred people and no one would ever bump into each other Trudy thinks to herself.

The two friends walk into the library together anyway. “So happy you all could come in time for lunch. It will be served on the terrace I’m told, and probably within the hour,” Cheryl says.

The girls turn to her and walk over to her, kisses on the cheek with each one and greetings of ‘we wouldn’t miss this’ all around. “Trudy, these are my friends from the club; Meredith, Penelope, Sasha and Tawny. Everybody this is Trudy, my most dearest friend from college, practically the sister I never knew I was missing,” she smiles at Trudy who returns the smile. The other girls put out their hands to shake Trudy’s. Ahhh, she is not worthy of even fake cheek kisses, Trudy thinks to herself. No matter. She will not see them after these couple of days ever again. She is saddened to note, she is not sure how much she will see Cheryl either. She knew her friend came from money, she never knew how much though, she reminds herself to not think of this. This part is not important, the wedding is.

Seeing this place and these women, she realizes that after marriage, Cheryl will be going back to the life that was planned out for her. Trudy shakes her head, she will make the best of these days together with Cheryl; she will take all she can from this place. That horse, he better come back, she simply has to ride him. His entire being exudes free spirit, if he were a man, she would be in love. She smiles to herself.

“Trudy?!” Cheryl calls her. Trudy looks to her friend.

“Sorry, lost in thought. So, how many of you are coming to the midnight bar b que? Cook needs numbers,” Trudy says matter of factly.

Trudy wants to laugh at their stunned expressions. One even put her hand to her chest in shock, “Really, I’m not kidding. I never kid about a bar b que,” Trudy says to emphasize the point that it is going to happen whether they want to come or not, “all the men folk will be there for sure. I hear there are eight of them, and only four of you, that makes two a piece!” she laughs, they did not.

“Cheryl, we have traveled so far today. I’m sure an early dinner is planned and we will be retiring early to properly prepare for tomorrow’s activities,” Tawny speaks for the crowd.

“Suit yourself,” Cheryl adds, supporting her friend, “I plan on being there and having a grand ole time. The cook here makes a bar b que like no other and Trever is bringing out blankets so everyone can lay down and stargaze over on the greens by the first hill. Since you’ve had such a rough traveling experience though, you are free to go to sleep early, I’m sure we can send something up for dinner to your room,” she says in a half mock of their experience, she knows



damn well they all flew first class and had a driver pick them up and bring them to and from the airport, they never even touched their suitcases. Suitcases!!! They are here for a couple of days and each of them has more than one. Unlike her Trudy, she didn’t even have one, she puts her arm around Trudy’s shoulder, “Come I’ll show you the rest of the grounds while these ladies get settled before lunch. See you on the terrace in an hour ladies,” she calls to them as she pulls Trudy out of the room.

“They are your friends, you invited them,” she reminds Cheryl.

“Retire my ass, none of them ever worked a day in their life, what could they retire from? I’ll put money on their first-class flight as well as their door to door poor dear don’t lift a finger treatment. Ugh, they exasperate me. Daddy told me I was still obligated to invite them. He hates all this propriety shit as much as I do, but we were in the same club and the fathers and mothers are friends, it’s to be expected. Besides, it will give my mother someone to talk to. But I don’t have to like it, nor do I have to cater to them. Come,” she leads Trudy out the back of the house towards the terrace but they walk further, down a path and come to another pond inside the thick trees.

“Is this the same pond you see when you come in?” Trudy asks.

“Oh, no, that one is clean water, only has plant life in it. The grounds keepers make sure things stay that way. This one has fish, frogs, crawfish and who knows what, it’s the one my brothers and I prefer; we always liked to watch the life take place. Look over there on the rock to the left,” Cheryl points out, “a bull frog and its mate”

The girls crouch down to look together, Trudy watches in amazement, “Oh Cheryl, a life on this estate must have been exhilarating,” she says.

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“We only came here to visit my grandparents. When the last of them died, we only came for family functions because this is the only place that can accommodate everyone. My brother’s wedding was here too. He is so tied up at school, they aren’t coming until the morning of the wedding, or so he says, I think my sister in law has other plans. He says he has only twenty-four hours off, but a lifetime after that to enjoy Calvin. Calvin and he met a few times already though. Calvin spoke to him about graduate work and places to go. I can’t believe we will be so close to the estate. The idea feels like a dream. We are contemplating living here, Calvin brought it up himself and I nearly fell over,” Cheryl says in a dream like voice.

“Cheryl, that wouldn’t be my dream, it would be a fantasy. First the horse, now this pond, it’s secluded, it tunes out the rest of the world by listening to the sounds of nature here. I’m guessing you came here because you know your club girls won’t follow you here,” she says.

“Precisely. They will be powdering their noses and preparing for lunch. Eight boys two for each of them? Really Trudy I almost pissed in my pants after you said that. You know as well as I do that one of them is my brother and two others are Calvin’s brothers, one of which is married, only two are actually eligible, the rest are family and would never even look at them,” she begins to laugh again.

Trudy joins in the laughter, they look as if they are enjoying life to the fullest; the sparkle in their eyes show up, the light behind their joy is visible through the lens.

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“What else have you got planned Trudy? Or are we not planning and going to simply have fun?” Cheryl asks.

“Oh, planning, yeah not my thing, is it? But I would like to organize a good old fashion game of water balloons, imagine how much fun that will be? Remember we did it on campus and all of a sudden people we didn't know joined it, it was a blast!” Trudy screams.

“I haven't thought about that in a long time. That was the day that my baby sister came to visit and she met her first college boyfriend. That didn't last long. He thought she was easy picking,” she laughs.

“Yeah, don't make any unwanted physical advance on a girl who is trained in military style self-defense,” Trudy laughs and so does Cheryl.

They hear a chime and Trudy looks to Cheryl. “It's the lunch bell. No telling where anyone is in this place at any given time, so Daddy installed speakers all over the estate, Cook only has to chime once and everyone knows it's time to eat. Come on, we'll visit the frogs later, the best time is at sunset, they're so noisy then,” Cheryl gets up from her perch on the rock and Trudy follows her back to the terrace where she sees a spread fit for twenty or more. “Wow, Cook outdid himself,” Cheryl says, “Look Trudy,” she points to a table to the side.

“He remembers me?” Trudy asks.

“No one else ate his Vienna rolls like you did. I'll bet he has a million of them stacked away for the next couple of days and the leftovers to go home with you. And look at all these spreads and salads. Ooo pasta salad, roasted peppers, and my all-time favorite pasta with broccoli. Come, let's grab a plate. First come first eat here,” Cheryl says.

They grab plates and begin filling them up hungrily. A few of the men who have arrived show up as well. Donovan comes out and smiles. He loves Cheryl, he loves watching her enjoy life here as well, no one loves this place like she does, well, except maybe Trudy. He notes. “Afternoon ladies,” he says.

“Daddy!! You're here. Look Trudy only took two rolls, she is holding back I guess,” she jokes.

“Hey!” Trudy says.

Trudy hugs Donovan with her free hand and he in turns kisses the top of her head. “Love you too kiddo, what's good?” he asks.

“Foood! I'm starved,” a voice from behind calls.

“Trudy, you remember my cousin, don't you?” Cheryl asks, hoping she doesn't sound stupid introducing them again.

“I remember everyone. Nice knees,” she says.

He looks down, his pant legs are filthy, probably from being crouched down and snapping paparazzi pictures of her all day. The camera loves her smile. “Occupational hazard,” he smiles.

“Vienna rolls? Hey those are mine!” he says grabbing one off of Trudy's plate before she can react.

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Trudy watches him as he smiles and takes a bite. She knows that look, it’s one of pure enjoyment. These rolls are the kind you have to savor. She will forgive him, at least he appreciates what he took from her, there are plenty back on the table waiting for her and she is sure the cook has a private stash for her as well.

“If you look around, you’d find the table is full of them,” Trudy says.

“But you picked this one out, it was probably the best one on the table, and let me tell you, it is. Want the other half?” he says still with a mouth full and holding out the half of roll.

“No thanks, I always put the lesser one on top so I can enjoy the better one more fully,” She says smiling as she takes a bite of the one on her plate. Oh, she is savoring this, Cook’s rolls are to die for.

“Cheater,” he says laughing and walks away to take a plate and fill up.

“Who else is eating all of this?” Trudy asks.

“Oh, this is lunch, everyone comes to eat, see, here comes the stable manager and his crew, the gardeners will be here soon, they have to come the furthest, but lunch for the people on the other side of the pond is being served there today. It’s too complicated to try and only serve half of the people. This whole, don’t see each other until the wedding thing, is pretty tricky. Good thing we have the pond right Daddy?” she asks sweetly

“Oh, that’s why we kept it, yeah good thing,” he laughs

“Trudy, that was some horse maneuver you did out there this morning,” the stable manager calls to her.

“It wasn’t a maneuver, I was saying hello. He is a fascinating stallion, he wants the attention. He will come around, you’ll see. He will be back tomorrow. I know he will. Do you have a place for him?” she asks.

“For a wild one? No, you can’t contain them. We have enough, not looking for more,” he says.

“He isn’t wild, he was owned, he has markings around his neck that’s how I formed my theory about him, he has been ridden before, but they tried to tame his spirit, you can’t, it’s his personality but he likes it here. You’ll see tomorrow. Come with me to the hill in the early part of the morning, bring a rope and a bucket,” she says.

“A bucket?” he asks.

“You’ll see,” she says.

The stable manager shrugs, “Ok. But early morning to me is 5:00am,” he says, “I start work at 6:00am,” he says feeling that she may be like Cheryl’s other friends who don’t understand what real morning is.

“5:00 it is then. I’ll be there, and so will he, you’ll see,” she says with confidence and longing.

Cheryl looks at her friend, what the hell is she thinking? A rope she understands but a bucket? She lets that thought simmer in her mind a minute, then she stops suddenly, oh Trudy you can’t be thinking of riding him? Can you? She looks at her friend. Trudy smiles a knowing smile, Cheryl has read her mind. You can’t stop a moving train, she only hopes that Trudy doesn’t get hurt before the wedding.



Life, that is what Trudy breathes into every place she goes and love, lots of love. This is why Cheryl loves her so much. She brings life, she brings love, she brings an aura of enjoyment to everything even if it’s mundane like eating lunch. Cheryl looks around and sees how everyone is now talking with and laughing with Trudy, it’s what she does.

Donovan comes up behind his daughter, “She sure is special Cheryl. I’ve never heard my stablemen talk so much and so adamantly. Grandpa would have loved her too, don’t you think?” he asks.

Cheryl turns to her father, “Everyone does,” she says simply. It’s true, you can’t meet her and not love her, except for those ladies inside, who haven’t joined us for lunch. They won’t come out until the workers have left, then they will claim that they had fallen asleep or something. Damn snobs, she hates that everyone talked her into having them here. She will tell the photographer not to take group shots with her in it. Yeah, that’s how she will handle this. She will let them have a private photo shoot with him, they will love the attention, but she will not have to see those pictures in her album, she may take one, make it small and put it in a collage photo. Cheryl smiles at this idea, it’s what Trudy would have thought of if she asked her opinion.

She thinks back on when Trudy talked to her about how much Calvin loved her, she said to her; does he love you in the mud? Does he love you when you’ve been up all night studying and have no make-up on? Does he love you when you were sick and couldn’t move? Cheryl, he loves you the person, your looks are only part of you. Trudy was right then and she still is now, true love comes from within, it’s for all occasions not only the fancy, dressed up ones. Cheryl is lucky, she and Calvin are very close, they are already best friends; getting married will only enhance their relationship.

“Cheryl, you’re drifting in and out of reality. You have a house full of guests, let’s join them for lunch,” Donovan says.

“You’re right Daddy, but it’s this place, my mind always wanders here, it’s such a free place. Damn those ladies for not coming out, these people are the best. I won’t stay here with them for lunch Daddy, I won’t. I’m sure Trudy has something planned and if she doesn’t something will come to her,” she says.

“I’m sure she will. Trudy, save me a roll, will you?” Donovan calls to Trudy.

Trudy looks over at father and daughter. Cheryl will make a beautiful bride, a wonderful wife and an equally wonderful mother when the time comes. She hopes Donovan is alive long enough to see, at least the first baby. They don’t think she knows, but she does, she can see the illness in his eyes. If they don’t want to tell her, she is ok, she understands. This is Cheryl’s happy time, she will keep life happy.

“Mr. Donovan I’ve picked you out the perfect one but you’d better come quickly your nephew keeps grabbing them from me,” she smiles back at him as he picks up his pace to join her near the bread table. Cheryl is right behind him.

“So, what are we doing after lunch Trudy?” Cheryl asks.

“Hmmm, I was thinking we take a walk along the pond you showed me. I think there is something there we haven’t seen yet. I saw some bird nests I want to investigate. If they are what I think, you may have babies being born here sooner than later, this place will be hoping with animal



life. There are certain kinds of birds that will draw other wildlife. It’s as if they are saying, this is a safe place here. They draw animals but none you’d have to be afraid of,” she says warmly. Every time she talks of animals and nature, there is warmth in her heart. She makes you want to love the nature around you too.

“Wow, you saw that in our short time there? Sounds great. Daddy want to join us?” Cheryl asks. If Cheryl is asking, she wants him to go, he thinks to himself, “Ok baby girl. It’s your week, I’m at your command,” he says.

“Baby girl? I thought the princess was younger?” Trudy asks.

“HA!! *You* call me princess too!” a voice from behind says.

“Abby!!!” Cheryl squeals. The sisters hug a tight hug.

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“I hear we’re having a midnight bar b que; haven’t done that in years. Trever told me it was Trudy’s idea but I think this one was his. He is too happy about all the planning. Bringing blankets and all. I can’t wait. Thank you for having real food Cher, I’m starved. Don’t get me wrong I love me a good garden salad but hand me over some of Cook’s pasta salad any day and I’m a happy camper. Hi Daddy,” she kisses him on both cheeks, “you look wonderful,” she whispers in his ear.

“I also heard about the black stallion, I can’t wait to see him. Where did he come from?” she asks looking around for the man in charge.

“We aren’t sure, showed up about a couple months ago, hasn’t left. Trudy here thinks he was once owned but they tried to control him, he is a free spirit I think is what she calls him,” Donovan answers.

“He is, you will see when you see him up close, he loves attention but he also loves his freedom. I’m telling you if he were a man, I’d marry him in a minute,” she says.

“Hey the princess is here, the parties can start now,” their cousin calls out.

“Not you too, will I ever outgrow that nickname?” Abby says.

“No,” comes from everyone in unison. Then there is laughter and a lot of it. Lunch goes on for another half an hour, then people start to disperse back to their jobs, lots of kisses and hugs as they leave.

This really is a village in it of itself, Trudy observes. Everyone who works here is loved and everyone who is loved enjoys working here. What a place. She had better make the most of her time here for as long as it lasts. The day of the wedding will be total chaos but she is sure it will be organized chaos, judging by the group she has already seen here. Maybe she can stay an extra day, she doesn’t need to report to work for five days; she took the whole week off. She assumed she would need a day to recuperate from here, it’s not recuperation she will need though, its detox. How can she go back to her work after being here? This place breathes nature in so many ways you don’t see in a man-made zoo or conservatory.

She could spend the rest of her life here and never tire, ever. Trudy puts her plate down and walks aimlessly away towards the pond she was near earlier with Cheryl. Her curiosity has the better of her. She finds the exact spot that she and Cheryl sat and sits down again. She closes her eyes and listens. She wants to hear all who live here. Trudy puts herself in a yoga trance and focuses on the world around her.

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Trudy looks up and sees the nests she saw before, she wants to make sure they are what she thinks they are; she looks for a good place to climb. The tree next to the one with the nests looks strong enough, Trudy walks over and begins to climb. It’s a peaceful climb, the trees are strong here, there is enough give on each branch that she can pull herself up to the next one without worrying that it will snap and make her fall. Trudy perches on a branch almost exactly parallel to the one with the nest. She reaches her phone out to snap a picture of the nest, zooms in her lens. “Got it,” she says softly.

She brings her phone back and looks at the picture. “Oh, what a wonder small babies are. It’s them alright,” she sighs, “all the new life that will come. Spring time means the autumn will be filled with babies here. The pond that has no fish life will be a great water hole for every one of them. Oh Cheryl, do you even know how much of life you have here?” she says softly.

“Trudy?” a voice from below calls softly.

Trudy looks down and sees Abby, “Hey,” she says softly.

“Don’t move, I’m coming up,” Abby says and quickly climbs the limbs to sit next to Trudy. “What did you discover?” she asks.

“Look,” she points to the nests.

“Oh wow. How did you know they were here?” she asks quietly.

“I saw the bottom of the nest, they are very specific in how they build their nests. I’ll show you when we go back down. It’s a good sign you know. Their nest means more animals will come,” Trudy says keeping her voice very low.

“Trudy, this is so amazing. Wow zoology must be fascinating. I always did love nature but Cheryl says you live nature. I haven’t decided what to major in yet. I’ve been taking all the preliminary courses first. I love plant life sometimes more than animals. But can you make a living with that? I want to be able to support myself like Cheryl will. Not that we have to per se, but we want to. What’s in savings is there as a cushion for life but we want to make our own lives. Daddy wants us to also. What do you think?” she finishes her ramble.

Trudy thinks for a moment, “Abby, anything with plants can be an amazing field. But can you pinpoint what you love about them and what you’d want to do with them? I’ve always lived and breathed better with nature, you can ask my parents, when they couldn’t find me in my bedroom, they knew I was outside. So, in order for me to be safe, my dad built the best treehouse a girl could want, with a sunroof so I could lay there and watch the stars. I taught Cheryl how to do this and find peace and she has never turned back. You can’t watch nature and walk away. Sorry, I’ll get off my soap box now,” Trudy says softly.

“Trudy, I’ve met you a handful of times and each time I feel as if I’ve met you for the first time. You constantly bring newness and freshness to everyone. I love all that plants give us, and how we are supposed to interact with them to enhance our lives, even the ones we eat. I asked Daddy if I could put a greenhouse here and he said I have to ask Cheryl. You know this is all hers, right? He is leaving the whole place to her. My brothers are each getting other items of his

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affection, of equal importance to them. Me? I get the boat he bought years ago that my mom would never be caught dead on,” Abby says.

“Somehow that doesn’t sound like much compared to this estate,” Trudy comments.

“Oh, Trudy, it’s not a simple boat, it’s a large yacht, plus the dock and the boathouse that are connected to it. Something like that is more than enough for me. It’s prime real estate, we’ve had tons of offers over the years by builders who want to commercialize the place, but we won’t sell. Annoys the shit out of my mom, probably the reason I won’t sell either,” she says

“How do you know all this?” Trudy asks.

“Daddy wanted us to know ahead of time what is in his Will. He wanted us to confront him to his face if we had any problems with the contents. We sat down, he and all of us kids and worked everything out. Momma gets to keep the house and enough money to keep her satisfied for the next twenty years if she isn’t stupid with the money, it may last longer. I know it’s not nice to say, but she is all about that house and everything inside it. Everything in that house is deemed “proper” for this reason or that, otherwise the item was never purchased. We all took a step back from her lifestyle the moment we could. Our daddy, he is a special man. I’ll tell you, I’ll be bawling like a baby when the time comes. I do hope you’re around. I think the situation will be easier the more people are around that loved him. Being around you always makes things better. Sorry, that sounded hokey, even to me. And I probably shouldn’t have said anything about Daddy either, damn, Cheryl is going to kill me,” Abby bows her head in embarrassment.

“Sounds honest to me and when we speak honestly we feel that way, when we learn to feel honestly and allow ourselves true feelings, our lives are happier. I’m glad I can help you in that. Your brother in law is going to be in plant and medical research. Why not follow him there? There is also, marine biology if you’re going to be living in a boathouse by the water, or, hey. Abby,” Trudy stops herself, she hates giving advice because if it turns out the person hates what she says, she would always feel guilty, she takes a deep breath, “you see, there are so many possibilities with plants, you need to go visit people who work with them in various capacities and see what pulls at your heartstrings the most. Life may surprise you,” she says instead.

“I knew it would be good to talk to you. Thanks Trudy, you really are all the friend a person needs. Look over there, under the brush of the bushes across the way,” she points to some movement across the pond.

Trudy and Abby gasp at the same time. Out from under the bush, comes a family of rabbits. One, two, three, and more. Abby grabs Trudy’s arm for fear of shouting she puts her other hand on her mouth and leans her head onto Trudy’s shoulder. They watch in silence as the new family discovers the outside for what seems to be the first time. “Nature never ceases to amaze,” Trudy whispers.

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There is a slight rustle in the leaves behind them and the rabbits all scurry back into their hole. “Damn, Trudy you said you would take me here. Where the hell are you?” Cheryl says annoyingly.

“Up here big sis,” Abby calls.

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"Aw, damn again. I missed it didn't I. Did they hatch?" she asks.

"No, not yet, but they will soon, but not until after the wedding I'm afraid and we won't be here to witness the blessed event," Trudy says sadly.

"Damn one more time. Trudy, you were supposed to be here to entertain me but you skipped out of lunch before me and I got stuck with those girls. As soon as Abby left they showed up, I was talking to Daddy about the best place to put up the greenhouse Abby and they burst in with all their stupid comments about how lovely the spread is and how elegant the setting. Ooooo, I was so angry at them. I blew up. Well, my mouth did," she says smiling.

"Ok, wait there, we have to hear this face to face," Trudy says, and the two of them climb back down from the tree. Trudy's shirt gets snagged along the way but she doesn't seem to care.

"Come into my parlor, I've all the best seats laid out for you," she shows them all the large boulders surrounding the opening with open arms.

"You always do your best decorating by accident Trudy," Cheryl jokes.

The three women sit down and Cheryl begins her tale, "I couldn't believe the nerve. They came out almost an hour after lunch was called for. I said to them, well, you're an hour late I hope there is enough food left for you. To which they said, 'we were busy', and then I glared at them. I really did Trudy, my eyes were shooting daggers when I said to them, the only reason you didn't come out is because the workers were here you damn snobs. Then I started to walk away and I finally turned back and said, there are no diet salads by the way. Everything here is made with good old fashion butter," Cheryl crosses her arms over her chest, still annoyed that the whole thing happened. How dare they shun her friends, her true friends, the people from the estate.

Trudy and Abby look at each other than began to laugh, the good kind of laugh, the kind that comes from down in the gut and comes out in barrels of laughter. Cheryl soon joins in.

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"I, can't, breathe," Trudy finally says through bouts of laughter.

"Am I interrupting something?" Donovan asks, "that was some performance young lady. Took guts I must say. Your mother was right behind them and heard you, the look on her face was priceless, but she shook that off and invited the girls to join her in the tea room, she told them she would have a proper lunch sent up to that room in few minutes," Donovan pauses.

He looks at his girls and at Trudy, more love between these three wasn't possible. Trudy did bring out the best in his girls and he is ever so grateful. His boys arrived asking if Trudy is here yet, "Your brothers are here, waiting for you guys down at the big pond," he smiles.

"I knew he'd come early the big dope," Cheryl says of her brother

"Ok Daddy, but how did you know we were all here?" Abby asks.

"I followed the trail of love," he says.

Trudy is first to jump up and give him a kiss, "You're the best, you know that. If only you were a few years younger, and maybe not so married," she smiles at him. Donovan puts his arm around Trudy's shoulders and leads the girls out of the trees and walks them over to the big pond.

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“So, Trever says the purpose for the pond has always been to keep people from interacting with each other?” Trudy asks Donovan.

“Ha, I suppose that’s true in a way. My father bought this land with a song and promise. The price was the song but the promise was that the original owners could live on the other side of the pond for as long as they needed to.

At that time, it was the deal of the century to a family down on their luck financially but not used to being so. They all agreed instantly. My father had the main house, the stables, and everything on this side scrubbed down raw, then he started all over again. He and my mother, my brother and myself, and sometimes my sister, we worked every hour we weren’t at school or work, to bring this place back to life. When he could afford to, he paid someone to do the hard stuff, when he couldn’t, we learned how to do those things ourselves. Nothing wrong with working with your hands, he used to tell us.

My brother became a surgeon because he loved to fix things and he thought people laying on a table wouldn’t be as backbreaking. That’s the story he tells his children anyway. When each of us got married we lived across the pond for the first year of our marriage, far enough away and close enough if we wanted to be. It’s a great way to start things out, but Cheryl’s mother didn’t think so, no, she believed that we should have had rooms in the main house. I should have known then what life would be like with her, but I made a vow on my wedding day, and part of me loved her, there is a small part that still does. We kind of co-exist these days, well, if I’m honest, for years, but it suits us both. I have my kids to occupy my time and my life, and she has her club and her big house, she worked so hard on,” Donovan stops near a rather large oak tree.

“Oh Daddy, remember when I climbed this for the first time? I thought Grandpa was going to personally come up and drag me down,” Abby says.

“He came close,” Cheryl remembers.

“That he did baby girl, that he did. This tree was planted on a very special day,” Donovan says solemnly.

“Let me guess, it was a day full of love, you can tell. Look at the tree. The bark is solid, no cracking at all. It has been tended to with love for many years. No animals live in the trunk, and there are only a select few branches that have nests. A tree this size and age, should have hundreds of animals by now, but the animals know. They know,” Trudy says softly rubbing the tree’s trunk.

“It was planted the day my grandmother died. With her last acorn. Right Daddy?” Cheryl says softly in remembrance.

“It was planted with her favorite necklace too, wasn’t it?” Trudy asks.

Everyone looks at Trudy, no way she knows that. Donovan lifts one eyebrow towards her. Trudy walks over to him and pulls him to the tree, she points up; there, about six feet above him, hanging half way out of the tree is his mother’s charm from her necklace. Donovan feels the tear on his cheek before his head can process what he is looking at. It’s half a charm, but it’s hers all right, he can tell.

Cheryl and Abby run over to the tree and look up, Cheryl puts her hand to her mouth and gasps, Abby puts her arms around her sister from behind and hugs her.



The brothers, seeing a commotion by this special tree walk over and begin to look up as everyone else has. “Oh Daddy, I’m sorry,” says the oldest one and he pulls his father into a tight hug. Then the next brother, then one sister at a time.

Trudy takes a step towards the tree. “Thank you, I think he needed that today,” she tells the tree and leans over and kisses the trunk, a butterfly lands on her shoulder, she stands still and watches, it flaps its wings once, twice, three times then it flutters by her face and flies away. “You’re welcome,” she says with a tear of her own.

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There is a chime sounded on the estate. “We already ate, what can that be?” Trudy asks. The family, now dispersed into smaller sibling hugs, look up as well. Donovan looks at his watch, “It’s a new sound. I think it means the groom is here.” They watch as a couple of cars pull into the driveway and drive to the other side of the pond. “Yep, good old Trever. He never misses a beat, does he? Come Cheryl, let’s get you into the main house and try and see if we can make civil conversation with the ladies whom are supposed to be in your bridal court,” Donovan says.

The siblings, hold on to each other’s hands and begin to run towards the house. Trudy takes Donovan’s hand. “You did well Mr. Donovan,” Trudy says sliding her hand into his bent arm watching his children.

He pats her hand, “That I did, that I did. And you? Who will tame your heart my dear?”

“It is not meant to be tamed, loved and appreciated maybe, but tamed? Not for me. I need someone who will take me for all my good and not as good qualities. Someone who will understand my need to be me. Make sense?” she asks as they stroll along.

“For anyone else no, but for you? I would accept nothing else. My guess is, none of the men who will be eligible here would fit that bill. Most are too stuffy. They don’t understand how Calvin is marrying a woman who wants to work and they definitely don’t understand how both of them declined a renewal on their family club memberships. Calvin told me he wants to enjoy life and live life not be a taker but be an enjoyer. I suppose he subscribes to the Trudy lessons in life blog,” Donovan laughs at his own joke.

“Hmmm, you know, that may not be a bad idea, I have so many ideas all at the same time, maybe I *should* write them down,” Trudy holds on to Donovan’s arm with both hands now and leans her head on to his shoulder. Donovan lifts his other hand and crosses his body to lay his hand on top of Trudy’s, they remain this way the rest of the walk to the main house.

They know immediately which room everyone is in by the sound of their laughter. They look to each other and shrug their shoulders and continue to walk towards the room with the noise. Donovan looks around, he sees his own children, a few of the gardeners, his head stable master and Trever, he should have known, no one can laugh like he does.

“Aren’t we missing people?” Donovan asks referring to the ladies they were supposed to be talking to.

They erupt in fits of laughter immediately. His stable master comes over to Donovan, “A piece of work your daughter, a damn fine piece of work at that,” he pulls Donovan with him, “let



the young ones enjoy themselves, I actually came by to speak with you about a couple of items, you up for estate matters?" he asks in a more serious tone.

Donovan pats Trudy's hand, "Go, enjoy the fun," he kisses her forehead like any father would. Any father, accept her own, she thinks to herself. Sure, her father loves her in his own way but affection? Not his thing. The treehouse was the last thing he did for her and that was more out of fear than love.

"Ok, what did I miss?" she asks.

As everyone begins to sit down again, Trudy notices for the first time that there are a few more men with the brothers here right now. "Hi, Patrick," the youngest brother says, "Dwain, you already met before, a few times I believe. Somehow, I was never home when you were there but I would know Trudy anywhere, simply by description. Some of these clowns are cousins, some friends, you can get their names later. I'm the only important one," he smiles at her as she shakes his hand.

"Family doesn't shake," he pulls her in for a hug. Patrick leaves one arm around Trudy's shoulders, "You see this?" he asks as he waves his hand around the room to show her everyone again, "this here is what we like to call love. We love each other, make each other laugh, cry, get angry, you name it; but the bottom line is, that all true feelings are from the insides. We come together for every event in each other's lives. Calvin would normally be here too but he can't right now. We are going to head over there now, but as maid of honor we understand you can't be there because you have to be here. We will all see you again at the bar b que. Keep my sister safe and her mouth shut. It will be better that way," Patrick leans over and kisses Trudy, a few of the cousins do the same as they leave the room. Dwain stops by for a second, "Trudy, thank you for coming, I'm sorry my wife couldn't be here, but as you may have heard the baby took ill and she only wants to expose him the day of the wedding, it will be enough then. You understand, right?" Trudy shakes her head. Another kiss on the cheek and Dwain picks up the rear of the group and heads back out to the other side of the pond.

"Ok, I definitely missed something here," Trudy says as she sits down next to Cheryl on the couch.

"I suppose all my resentment is coming out at these girls, it's not too fair to them, but they keep opening their mouths, I can't help myself. I don't hate them, only their fake lifestyle. You know what they asked me? They asked if I had ordered anybody to come and help them prep for the wedding. I said what the hell does that mean? You can't get dressed by yourselves?"

Then they had the audacity to tell me that at the last club wedding, the bride provided for manicures, facials *and* massages on the day of the wedding and they were simply asking when that was scheduled.

Oh, Trudy, I began to cry, I really did. I had tears running down my cheeks as I told them if they want that stuff Trever would drive them into the city to get it done, they should make the appointment and he will take them. Then what's her name, um, yeah Tawny, the ring leader, she asked about their hair being done as well. I picked up the brush sitting on the table and threw it at her and said, here brush your own damn hair. My tears were clouding my eyes and it wasn't until after it fell to the ground did I realize I threw a horse brush.

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I’m a bit embarrassed about my actions and yet I feel relieved at the same time. I am awful, aren’t I?” Cheryl says, now out of breath and tired.

“Come, lay your head down here. We could both use a nap. You lay on me and I’ll lean here in the corner of this couch. Twenty minutes, then we will call the store ourselves and get them to come here; and tell them it was planned all along and watch their faces,” Trudy says.

“I love you my sister, too bad we aren’t really related,” Cheryl says already half asleep already on Trudy’s lap.

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Trudy strokes Cheryl’s hair a moment with her eyes half closed. She stares out the window in front of her. She slides her phone out of her pocket without disturbing her best friend’s much needed sleep.

She looks for the phone numbers she needs. “Hello? Do you do private parties? Yes, well my best friend is getting married in two days and our regular people backed out on us today. I know, can you imagine? It’s horrifying to say the least. Anyway, I’m at the White Estate and there are four young ladies, a mother of the bride and the bride herself whom need to be taken care of. What can you do?” Trudy pauses and listens, all of this is very foreign to her. But she listens for something that may sound outrageous, well at least outrageous for this bunch. Finally, the woman comes up for air.

“That sounds perfect, what time will you be here then? 8:00am to start everything? Very well. I’ll make sure to tell the bride’s mother when to expect you then. How many people are you sending again? Really? That sounds good I suppose. When you get here you will be directed to the proper room. Thank you,” Trudy hangs up.

“You will tell the bride’s mother what dear?” Cheryl’s mom asks sounding annoyed and condescending at the same time.

“Shhh,” she points down to Cheryl, “didn’t Cheryl tell you? The regular beauticians cancelled on her moments ago, then those girls came in making demands of her and she couldn’t help but be out of control. Do you blame her? I mean who cancels so close to the event? Plain rude is what it is and its thoughtless to leave a bride in such a state. I, for one, will never use them again.

That aside, I called over to The Palace Boutique and they said they will send six women out at 8:00 am the day of the wedding, I spoke with Harriet who says with that many people they will be able to take care of everyone with time to spare. You’re looking at me funny, did I not call the right place? I could have asked you first but as the maid of honor I had to think fast and as you can see the stress has gotten to Cheryl right now,” Trudy holds her breath and lets Cheryl’s mom absorb all she threw at her right now.

“The Palace Boutique said they would come? Trudy, they don’t do private parties for anyone. Are you sure?” she asks.

“As I said, I spoke with Harriet, if you want to call back and maybe discuss colors and such, I had no idea what colors you wanted. I’m sure she will be happy to hear from you directly,” she says softly trying to remind her mom that Cheryl is sleeping.

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“Did you call on the desk phone there?” she asks walking towards the desk.

“No on my phone,” Trudy holds it up equally annoyed, as the woman saw her on her own phone the moment she walked in.

“Thank you dear, I’ll call them back now before we forget,” she takes Trudy’s phone and sits at the desk to call on the house phone, “Harriet please,” she says hesitantly. Trudy watches as things are explained to Cheryl’s mom, she watches as she nods her head yes to many things, “and how much did you say this was going to be?” she asks, “Of course dear, we understand that emergencies like this cost more. I am only so happy that you could make yourselves available. Would you like me to send our driver to bring everyone up? Sure, that makes sense, you have all your equipment and supplies. Yes, yes, it will be a wonderful affair now that you have saved the day,” Cheryl’s mom gets up and brings back Trudy’s phone.

Trudy takes her phone but the other woman has not let go, “You should have counted in yourself Trudy, you are family,” she says.

Trudy, now in shock, but never at a loss for words, “I enjoy doing my own, these girls are used to having things done for them. It’s all good maám. I hope the place I called is a good one,” Trudy says.

“Good? You have no idea. This will stir up some gossip all over the county. The Palace Boutique never, and I mean really never has done a private party in our area. If they do show up, and I hope they do, I will be the talk of the club for months. Trudy darling, you keep Cheryl happy these next couple of days and I will keep the other ladies occupied. They are perfectly happy to have tea with me and take strolls along the pathway as proper ladies will. I will make sure to have them at all the meals but I’m afraid the midnight bar b que won’t be one of them. Truce?” she says.

Trudy, never to be outdone, “The only reason for a truce is if there was a war. Were we at war maám?” Trudy asks and pulls her phone into her own hands.

Cheryl’s mom storms out of the room, Donovan walks in, “I heard the whole thing. You did good Trudy. How did you know who to call?” he asks.

“First one in the internet search. Plus, Cheryl and I know Harriet from college, she’d do anything for her. Cheryl helped her pass some critical business classes, it’s because of Cheryl’s investment that Harriet was able to buy the Palace in the first place, when I saw her name, I realized why it rang a bell. She has no patients for these snobs, but she will come for Cheryl. She is sending six people. Five of them will handle the four ladies and your wife. Harriet herself will be doing Cheryl, or at least she will be drinking champagne with us and enjoying the morning on the balcony of our suite,” Trudy smiles.

“A horse brush, I wish I was in the room to see the look on her face, she probably doesn’t even know what it is otherwise she would have been taking an hour-long shower by now, I would presume. Take a few minutes yourself to sleep Trudy. Trever said they are only serving a light snack at 6:00 tonight because of the bar b que. Don’t worry Vienna rolls are at every meal,” he smiles at her.

Trudy gives in to her tiredness and leans her head toward Cheryl’s, to sleep. Donovan brings over a blanket to lay on the girls, his girls, all of them here at once. He is so blessed.

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The afternoon goes by quickly. Cheryl, Trudy, and Abby and even a couple of the ladies played some board games and watched a movie in the big den. Conversation was carried between Trudy and Abby most of the time. The ladies, as they have now been referred to several times by both Cheryl and Donovan, spoke only when directly asked a question, so they chose their questions carefully and enjoyed the laugh it brought when answered, or even when not.

While the second movie was playing, Trudy snuck out of the main house. Too much indoor time, not enough fresh air. She walks back to the big oak tree and rests her forehead on the trunk for strength, she stays there for an untold amount of time. She listens to all the surrounding noises. Trudy pushes off of the tree and walks towards the clean water pond as Trever says, the one with only plant life and not fish. How sad for the water she thinks. To be so lonely. "Would it be so bad to add some life into you?" she speaks out loud.

Trudy takes some water in her hands and drinks. She savors the freshness of the water. The flavor is cool and untouched, you can tell. "Maybe you aren't meant to have animal life my friend," she runs her hand back and forth in the water, then she stands up to watch the current. She notices how the moon shines right in the middle of the pond this time of night, how the moss growing at the bottom seems to float with the ripples of the breeze.

"Ahhhh," a voice cries out in pain.

Trudy looks up and sees someone across the pond, they have fallen and aren't moving, they are face down, perhaps in a drunken stupor or perhaps they slipped and hit a rock, there are many sharp ones around the edge on this side, there may be some there as well. She looks over, he is not moving, not even moaning. To get there she'd have to run all the way around the pond or at least to the foot bridge but if there is a head wound, that could be too long. Trudy takes her shoes off, throws her phone across the pond, thankful she learned to throw by one of the guys on the football team. Nods her head knowing it landed on grass and not a rock then she slides into the water and swims across to the person who fell.

She walks cautiously over, she lifts a hand to feel a pulse; she tries to speak softly, no response. She then rolls the person onto their back very carefully. Trudy grabs her phone and dials 666 like Trever told her to, "Trever, Trudy here. A man has fallen, his head hit a large rock, there is a lot of blood and he is not responding, I've got my shirt tied across his forehead to help stop the bleeding. What else can I do? Ok I'll wait," she hangs up.

In seconds, lights come on from nowhere and a siren is blaring over the estate. She sees a red light on her side of the pond, it must indicate where they are. Dwain is the first out and is next to her within seconds. He is calling orders to someone back at the house. "Trudy, why are you wet?" he asks.

"I was out on the other side, I heard a scream, I jumped in and swam across, it was faster this way, wasn't it?" she asks.

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He looks at where they are, the foot bridge is twenty yards down, straight across was faster, then he realizes her wet shirt is across the man's forehead, it's tied well so he doesn't want to change that, "Here, put my shirt on, better people see me without a shirt than you," he says.

Trudy looks down and realizes she is in wet clothes and only her bra on top. "Thank you, did I tie it the right way? I couldn't feel a pulse, I think he twisted his ankle and fell," she points to his foot.

Dwain looks at the ankle and sees the foot facing the wrong direction. "Whoa, good thing he is out cold. That's going to hurt when he comes to. I think it's only a concussion, but we'll have to get him to the hospital soon," the sirens are pulling into the estate and there are people yelling, telling them where to go. "You did great Trudy, not that I'm surprised," he smiles at her.

"I hope he will be ok," she says.

The emergency technician assesses the wrapping and also decides not to take it off for fear of starting the bleeding again. Dwain shows them the foot and the head guy winces, "That's going to hurt."

Before they pick him up Trudy walks over to the man and whispers something in his ear, she kisses his cheek and steps aside. At this time Donovan is behind her. "Why are you wet?" he asks, she explains why and he pulls her in for a hug. "I'm so happy you don't like to be indoors too long."

"Ok everyone, Mike is fine. Back to your places, we'll see everyone at the midnight bar b que," Donovan calls out. Dwain rushes over to them. "I'm going with him ok?" Donovan nods his approval.

"He is my brother's boy. A good kid, he is not a free spirit, but he is reckless. He got upset over a game and threw the game across the room and came storming out of the house, we left him alone figuring he needed time to cool off. When he screamed everyone thought he was getting his frustrations all out. You know, screaming to the wind. We didn't even think to check on him. I feel horrible," Donovan says.

"Your brother loves you, you know that, right?" Trudy says as they sit down on the bench. She knows a little of what happened in the past.

"What?" he says.

"You heard me, your brother loves you. Always did, but you guys have trouble being together, but it doesn't have to end that way. Call him Mr. D. Here is my phone, he should hear this news from you first," Trudy says.

Donovan puts his arm around Trudy's shoulders, and pulls her in, he kisses the top of her head, again.

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"Hello Cade? Donovan," first, he tells him about his son and which hospital they are taking him to, then he continues to talk to him while Cade drives to the hospital. "Plenty of room for you here if you need a place to bunk for the night, no use staying in a crummy hospital chair. Your call, you know the way. Yeah, it has been good to talk to you too," he says as he squeezes Trudy once more.

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They sit there for a while and suddenly Trudy shivers from the breeze, her legs are still soaked and the breeze was a cool one. “Come dear, let’s walk down to the foot bridge, it’s easier than swimming back, you need to get some dry clothes on. Big day tomorrow, 5:00am remember.

“I won’t forget, you mark my words, he’ll be there,” she says softly thinking now of the black stallion she has a date with in the morning. They walk to the main house together to get changed and ready for the night’s activity.

Trever rings the bell for the bar b que, everyone comes out, both sides of the pond, Cheryl is kept away from the lights, closer to the big oak tree so she won’t peek over to see Calvin, the men are keeping him occupied on their side with plenty of jokes and card games at the table.

People are running back and forth visiting with each other and eating great food. The rumble of a big truck has everyone stop for a moment. A rather large man gets out of the driver’s seat, then Dwain gets out of the passenger side and then he grabs a wheelchair from the trunk and brings it to the back seat, the large man reaches in and comes out with Mike, looking a bit woozy, a large cast on his foot from toes to knee. They wheel him up the path to Donovan.

“Damn shame to miss a bar b que over a few bumps and bruises now isn’t it Donovan?” the man says.

Donovan looks at his brother, he hasn’t seen him in person in years. They speak now and again, but seeing is believing. Cade is the one he needed to see. Donovan looks at Trudy, “Trudy, my big brother Cade, in more ways than one,” he smiles.

“Hello Cade, welcome to the party. We will be bringing out the blankets soon for some stargazing, I sure hope you’re game. It’s kind of a requirement tonight,” she smiles at him.

“Darlin, I’ll do pretty much anything you ask me to tonight,” he pulls her in for a hug and whispers in her ear, “I know you told him to call. Thank you from the bottom of my heart,” he stands up and she smiles.

“Well with a welcome like that I might even share a Vienna roll with you,” Trudy says.

Cade grabs some food and sits down next to his brother, “Dwain filled me in while we waited in the waiting room, Trudy sure does bring a lot of love with her, doesn’t she?” he asks.

“She is definitely my number three,” Donovan says.

“Do I need to guess the order?” Cade jokes.

The two men laugh together for a while, they talk, they get up and walk towards the oak tree, Donovan shows them what they found earlier today. Cade flashes his phone up the tree to look, “Well I’ll be damned, he did it, didn’t he? Good for you, old man, good for you,” he pats the trunk of the tree, he puts his arm around his brother’s shoulders, “Come, introduce me to the man good enough for one of your girls,” Donovan points across the pond and they continue to walk and talk.

“Well, hell Trudy, now you’ve gone and done it,” Cheryl says crying, “you’ve just done it all haven’t you?” she asks.

Trudy looks to Abby for clarification. “They haven’t spoken to each other, in person anyway, in almost nine years, since my mom blamed Uncle Cade for something that he didn’t do, but my father had to believe his wife at the moment, even though he didn’t. It’s so complicated and



yet, you saw this as simple, and here he is. Trudy, I said it before and I'll say it again, you bring new life everywhere you go," Abby hugs Trudy, Cheryl joins in.

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When the girls separate, Trudy uses her fingers to whistle really loudly. Both sides turn to her. In a very loud and authoritative voice, "Anyone who does not want to stargaze must leave. There is only enough room for those who care, grab a blanket. In a little while, we will break for apple pie, and a good night's sleep."

Trever passes out blankets, there are two and sometimes three people laying down looking up together, the silence is beautiful to Trudy. You hear nature, you hear silence, it's a beautiful thing, a tear runs down her cheek, a beautiful thing.

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Someone taps Trudy's foot, she looks towards her foot, its Cheryl's cousin, she puts her finger to her lips and nods. He lays down next to her, unsure of how she got a blanket by herself. They watch, and listen. After a few minutes, he pulls on her hand and points to the footbridge. Trudy looks over and gasps quietly. Her hand on her heart, there are two deer there looking as if they are standing guard. She reaches over to Abby and points, Abby lifts her head and gasps as well.

She wants to say something but mostly the three of them watch as the deer slowly cross the bridge and walk away from the pond back into the trees. Abby looks to Trudy, "so beautiful" she says. "Nature loves quiet," Trudy answers, they lay back down. This time she holds on to Cheryl's cousin's hand, interlocking their fingers.

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At 4:30 in the morning, Trudy can no longer sleep. She takes a quick shower, puts on appropriate clothing, and heads out the door, she does not bother waking anyone; she wants this moment to herself. Her and the stallion, it is between them, and the stable master, he will be there too, she is sure.

As she comes around the bend of the house and only half way up the hill, she sees him. He stands and waits for her, the stable master sees Trudy, she points, he stops as well. Slowly, Trudy walks to the green where she first met the stallion, where he is standing and waiting for her. She meets the stable master as he comes up from the other direction, she quietly takes the rope and the bucket from him and she goes to meet the stallion.

Her heart is racing, the dew is still on the grass and her feet are getting wet from it, the sky is not quite awake yet but the creature stands tall as if he owns the grounds he stands on. Even more beautiful than she saw him yesterday. "Remember me? Yes, you do, I gave you these," she holds out her hand and shows him a couple of sugar cubes, "Come, you can have them and then I get a ride," she says holding up the rope. He is not afraid, he knows what she is holding she thinks to herself.

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The horse pushes his nose to her face, she pats his neck, then she hugs his neck and doesn't let go for a minute, the sheer strength of this animal could crush her, but he is a gentle soul, she knows, she can tell, "Here you go," she feeds him the sugar cubes. When he takes them, he nods his head up and down, she slides the rope easily over his neck, "Wait here, you are too tall for me," she turns the bucket upside down now and stands on it. The horse gets closer to the bucket, he knows she wants to mount him. The bucket isn't much, but the extra height gives her what she needs to be able to pull herself up. The stable master watches with cautious eyes, "Careful Trudy," he says softly.

She nods. The horse uses his head to help Trudy up onto his back. She pats the side of his neck, "You're a strong one, aren't you? Take me for a trot, will you?" she asks.

The horse begins to trot along, Trudy throws her head back and laughs; she is thoroughly enjoying this ride. She bends her body towards his neck, and he knows what to do as she holds on to his mane and he goes for a run. The stable master watches in fear and in awe at the same time. Trudy is experiencing pure joy from her head to her toes.

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She guides him back to the stable master and brings the horse to a stop right by the bucket. "Join me," she says. Without hesitation, he climbs up behind her, scoots up and holds the mane around her. The horse treats them to a full run this time, with both people only holding on to the hair of his mane and the rope.

Breathless, Trudy brings the horse back to the stables, thinking he could use a good wash down, and he may enjoy one too. She brings him over to the landing where others get on and off horses. He is obedient. Trudy gets off second but the horse doesn't move, he waits for her, she grabs the rope and leads him to the water trough, but he pulls away.

"Ok, where do you want to go?" she asks. The stable master walks right behind them. The stallion wants to go in to see the other horses, she opens the main gate to the stables and this wonderful horse makes a gruff sounding noise, two horses back up.

"They are our other stallions," the stable master says to her.

The wild one prances himself in front of the mares, only one does not back up. He pushes on Trudy's head with his nose, she opens the gate to that mare and walks backwards to the stable master.

"What the hell?" he asks.

"I think he was warming up with us and now he has to burn off the rest of his energy, we were lucky enough to witness nature picking the best of the crop, he established his strength when he walked in. Now he wants to make more like him," she says shyly.

"We can't let that happened," the stable master says taking a step towards the horses. Trudy grabs his arm, "You rode him with me. The stallion has the strength of many, are you going to fight him on who he picks to mate with? The other stallions were smart enough to back away, I believe we should too," and they do.

They step back and watch as this powerful stallion establishes who is boss when it comes to the horses. "Never in forty years, never," he shakes his head.

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“He won’t let you tie him up. He will come and go as he pleases, I’m afraid,” Trudy says.

“He let me ride him though, he will respect me I think. I have watched this act many times, but this time, it actually feels like something being done with love. I have never, I don’t know if this is even normal anymore but he sure makes it look like it is,” he says to Trudy.

Trudy shakes her head. “I thought they prefer to be in the open, more room to, well, more room. It has to be cramped in there. They are both so large,” she says.

“Never in forty years,” they hear behind them.

“Donovan, why are you ups so early?” Trudy asks.

“You have to have slept to be up Trudy. We watched the whole run from our balcony. Then you were taking too long to come out, so I came to see, and what a show he gave,” he says.

Both horses make a rather strange noise and all three people look over. The black stallion makes his way out of the stall, he walks past them and over to the water trough, “Now he drinks? Does he want a smoke too?” the stable master asks in jest.

The stable master walks slowly over with a hose that has been turned on, the stallion allows himself to be washed off and brushed down. As soon as he has had enough, he is up on his hind legs again, everyone clears the way, and he trots off.

“Oh sir, please, take my phone number, you have to tell me if there is a colt that comes of this joining. I want to be here for the birth. Promise me,” Trudy pleads.

“You’ll be the first I call. I think I’m going to secure the fencing around the estate, it hasn’t been done in a long time. Maybe he will stay if he sees the gates are sturdy. We will give him what he needs here, I hope he lets me ride him again. What a ride that was, huh? Both of us, bareback even, what a rare treat,” he asks Trudy.

“Only bare though, don’t try and saddle him, won’t work,” Trudy says.

“No, his spirit needs to run, needs to roam. I’ll let him. Don’t you worry young lady. Now why don’t you two head back to the main house. I’m sure breakfast will be served soon,” the stable master shoos them on. He rubs the back of his neck and looks back at his stables, did that happen? He hears the sound of a horse running in the field behind the stables, yes, yes, it did.

“Until we meet again my friend,” he calls to the stallion.

~ ~ ~

Trudy is not sure she has ever experienced anything like that before, the euphoria of the ride, has to be better than sex that is for sure.

“What’s better than sex?” a voice from behind asks.

“ooo, did I say that out loud? Sorry, I rode the stallion today, bareback and he took off like a bullet, it was exhilarating, beyond that, it reached every nerve ending in my body and had me on edge, see better than sex,” Trudy says simply.

“Hmmm that’s a pretty tall order for any future husband of yours. I’ll make a note though,” he smiles at her.

“It’s good to keep a log you know, helps people remember events in their lives,” she says.

“Pictures are better, one picture can tell a whole story and if it doesn’t, it gives the onlooker a reason to contemplate why the objects in the picture are the way they are,” there is silence between them for a second or two, the breakfast chime sounds and interrupts their thoughts.



“Breakfast! I’m starved. I’ve had a whole day already,” Trudy says.

“Come then, I’ll race you,” and he takes off, so does Trudy. The two of them stop at the doorway half out of breath and walk in together. “Good morning to my no longer best friend who said she would wake me to see the stallion,” Cheryl says.

“At 4:30 in the morning? When was the last time you saw that hour?” Trudy asks.

“Well Daddy and Uncle Cade told us all about what happened, my uncle even took a couple of pictures and printed them out already, see?” Cheryl says.

Trudy looks at the pictures, they are good, they are an event, but he didn’t capture what went on, there is no feeling in them, what would set them apart is if you could feel what they felt while riding. “Ok, so I let you sleep, sue me,” Trudy jokes as she hands the pictures over to the next person to see. He looks down at them. Amateur for sure, they don’t capture her, or the stallion. He knows that is what she was thinking when she handed them to him, as proof that you can’t capture feelings in images.

“Don’t eat all the rolls this time!” he calls to Trudy.

“Plants are beautiful, but you can’t interact with them like the animal kingdom. But there is no reason I can’t do both is there? I mean I can do the research specifically about plants and I can love animals at the same time, can’t I?” Abby asks Trudy in an early morning ramble at the bread table.

“You can do whatever you want, that is what I was trying to tell you, the doors are open wide and if you don’t see what you want, then try and create it but also try and love your job. These are the types of professions that a person could actually love all the time. We are the lucky few.” Trudy says as she throws a roll over her shoulder, wondering if he will catch it. He does with a smile.

“Good morning and how are two of my favorite nieces?” Cade asks Abby and Trudy.

They smile, “The bride to be is angry I didn’t wake her for this morning’s festivities,” Trudy says.

“She looks like she isn’t awake now either,” he says.

“Midnight bar b que, favorite uncle showing up and telling tales, cousin being shipped off in an ambulance, I mean the girl should have slept soundly for hours,” Trudy’s sarcasm comes out more when she is tired herself.

Trudy’s phone buzzes, “*Are you out of your mind? Bareback on a horse you don’t know? My god Trudy I could kill you if I could only cross the pond before tomorrow. You’d be my best man too if there was a way. Please Trudy, no more capturing nature. I’m getting married tomorrow and you promised me a dance. C*” Trudy smiles at her phone, they’ve been teasing her for months about being Calvin’s best man as well as Cheryl’s maid of honor.

She writes back, “*I can only promise to try, but do you know where we are right now? It’s a natural heaven on earth. You didn’t say anything about climbing the trees yesterday☺*” Trudy puts her phone away and goes to enjoy her breakfast with everyone.

After breakfast Cheryl and Trudy go back to their bedroom. “Trudy, how was it riding bareback? I’ve never done that.”

“I can’t begin to describe how that felt, I don’t know if it was being bare backed or being on that stallion, but I can tell you, it was better than sex, that is for sure,” she says laughing.



“Yes, well in your vast experiences. I’m sure there was what to compare it to,” Cheryl says. Trudy sits down on the chair. “Tomorrow by noon you will be walking down the aisle on the greens below.” She says looking out the window

“Momma told me the call you made. Thanks, I was being a jerk,” Cheryl says

“I called Harriet,” she says.

“Holy cow!!!! For real?! I loooooooooooooove you Trudy!” Cheryl jumps from her chair and hugs her friend. “I hope she charges my mom a fortune, it will serve her right,” she says.

“I didn’t ask about price but your mom did, and I heard her say something about understanding emergencies cost more and how appreciative she was that it could even be done. Harriet said she will be doing you herself.” Trudy says.

“Ok, so champagne and strawberries with Trudy and Harriet in the morning. Well, that is the best present a bride’s maid could give. Any plans for the rest of today, I mean you have about conquered everything there is to conquer here.” Cheryl laughs.

“I’m not sure yet, we still have time for the water balloon fight but half the guys here are wimps and the ones who aren’t probably won’t participate because of Mike. How about a swim in the big pond? The water was beautiful when I was in there, it was a shame I ran through it so fast,” She says thinking out loud.

“Count me out, I’ve done that swim and sometimes I break out from whatever plant life is growing at the moment, sometimes not, can’t take that chance today. And don’t tell me we have to do a stupid rehearsal dinner. I’ll barf,” Cheryl says.

“No rehearsal anything. I already told Trever no. Hmnnnnnn. I’ll be right back,” Trudy runs out of the door.

“Bloody hell, she is planning something and I’m going to be the last to know, aren’t I? She can be so, so, well damn, I love her, who cares,” Cheryl sits back down on the chair and grabs a book.

Trudy sneaks down to the kitchen where she knows she will find Trever. “Caught you,” She says.

“Yes, you did Ms. Trudy, and may I say bravo on getting Cade here. Dumbest feud in the history of feuds. He has sent for his wife and his sister, they will be here by dinner time,” he says. “No feud with the sister though, she is caught in the middle and tries to play things safe around Donovan’s wife. Hates confrontation. The fact that she got divorced blew all of our minds.”

“Perfect, now tell me whose birthday is next in the family and don’t say you don’t know because you do, I see the wheels spinning in your mind already,” Trudy says challenging him not to come up with the answer.

“Donovan’s birthday is the day after the wedding, he said he didn’t want to share days with her, it made everyone laugh. But you and I both know what he really didn’t want. No sadness at a wedding, or any remembrances thereof,” he says.

“Ok, so family reunion, I’m thinking major birthday bash including old time party games like pin the tail on the donkey and a piñata, shaped like a horse of course. We will hang it from the oak tree. Yes, Trever we will, it’s ok I promise. But that’s not all is it? When is Cade’s birthday Trever? Treveeeever?” she drags out his name the second time.

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“Donovan’s wife tore them apart over foolishness, they stayed in touch without her knowing, you can’t be that close and cut it off for dumbness. So, for nine years she has thought she won in getting rid of him..” he says with a pause.

“Twins?” Trudy asks

Trever nods his head. “Strangest looking twins ever, different sacks completely so different children. Cade is the spitting image of his father and Donovan is a combination of the parents. Cade was born a full hour before Donovan. Which is why with each birth of his children he cried. Their sister is six years younger. She’s had a tough life, accident in high school, bad marriage, lost her job by being the scapegoat for someone else, she is always down wind of the fan, if you know what I mean. So yes, twins Trudy,” He says as if he let out a family secret, “happy to see each other, twins.”

“So, on the cake a bicycle built for two surrounded by a fence all the way around the cake. Then I want you to get out the giant projector and place it on the foot bridge, we will all watch a movie tonight with a picnic dinner, both sides of the pond will watch the movie, and eat at the same time. When the movie is over the cake will be rolled out and happy birthday will be sung loud and from the heart, you’ll see Trever, if it comes from within, its automatically louder,” she says.

“I’ll talk to Cook,” he says

Trudy turns back to look at him on her way out, “Liar, you know you want to do this, doesn’t matter how many birthdays are left, no need to forget any of them. Is there?” she asks.

“Damn, don’t you hate being right all the time?” Trever asks.

“Always, because I can also be wrong, but being quick witted has helped me out of a few of those ideas that didn’t quite make the cut. But this one will, you’ll see,” she blows him a kiss and runs back to Cheryl’s room. She tells her what she told Trever. Cheryl calls her brothers and sister, they love the idea.
~ ~ ~

As night falls and everyone heads outside for what is to be a picnic dinner, Trudy is pacing in her room. Something is wrong, she knows it, she can feel something. She looks outside, nothing by the stables, she looks towards the gazebo, no it’s perfect and ready for the wedding tomorrow. Her gut is pained by something, she will have to go investigate.

She quietly makes her way downstairs and heads towards the kitchen to talk to Trever when she sees Cheryl’s mother and Cade facing each other in the foyer. If they had pistols they would both be clutching them. This is not something she can interfere with, it’s not hers to fix. She quickly gets down the stairs and runs to Donovan’s office, she opens the door, not knowing if it is ok, “Cade, your wife, foyer,” she spurts out, out of breath. Donovan is out of his seat and running, she is right behind him.

“Is this your idea of some kind of joke Donovan?” she asks him before he even has time to stop running.

“Is what a joke?” he asks slowing to stand near his brother.

“This, this.....” she points to Cade in disgust.



“In case you’re wondering, this is Cade, my brother, my only brother, whom I love and have always loved. This is my gun carrying, son producing, lottery winning, brother. This is a man, a human being, wife dear, who deserves more respect than calling him ‘this’. Without him, you would have nothing because he is the one who helped me build the empire you so cherish. *He* is the reason you were able to join your precious club and snub your nose at the world all these years. Listen to me, and listen carefully, when I say, get off your blasted pedestal and come down to earth with the rest of us peons.

And as long as we are making things more clear for you, let me make your life a little easier to bare, I will be living out my life here at the estate where *I* belong, Cade and my sister will be staying with me, with his family here and hers. There is plenty of room in this big house built on true love. You, on the other hand, will be living in the house built on material love. It is all you love, it is all you’ve ever loved. You don’t love me, I’m not sure how much you ever did, you loved the idea of me and the status I brought to your life. I’m done, you will leave after the wedding and we will bid each other adieu and that will be that. Now, get out of Cade’s way so he and I can go have a large brandy with our adopted family member here, Trudy,” he pulls Trudy close with his arm around her shoulder.

Cheryl’s mom stands there stunned. Donovan walks past his wife, “we haven’t been married for years, don’t look so shocked. One more thing,” he pauses to look her in the eye, “Don’t play up the grieving widow too long, every one of *my* friends knows the truth of our marriage,” he walks away with Trudy under his arm and Cade at his side.

What they do not know is that Donovan’s real children are sitting in the den in earshot of the whole thing. “Who wants to join them for that brandy?” Dwain says smiling at his father’s gumption. They all get up and in a show of family bonds too strong to be broken by nonsense, they hold hands and walk past their mother and into the library with their father and uncle. They used to think it was a legitimate fight between brothers, now they know otherwise. All those years lost, thankfully they always kept in touch with their cousins on their own as well as their aunt and Uncle Cade.

Cade hugs his brother, “I’m sorry. I was frozen, I wouldn’t let her pass on principle. It was dumb, but what you did took guts, you didn’t stick up for me, you stuck up for yourself, it was a matter of self-respect. I would have stood there all day if I had to, for you Donovan.” Cade says

“And miss dinner? I think our cook is making your favorite lasagna tonight and parmesan noodles,” Donovan says trying to lighten the mood. He basically told his wife, they were divorced and only married on paper but if he was honest with himself, it’s been this way for most of their marriage, but he loves his children and spent his life raising them and being a father, he would not have traded that for anything. It was enough to sustain him for years, and now he needs his brother and sister, they are truly what he needs so he can let his children go and live their lives as they should. Independently.

Trudy is looking out the window, “Trudy, you knew to look for something didn’t you?” Cheryl asks quietly. She knows Trudy has a weird sense about sadness and anger, it hurts her, she can feel pain if its anywhere near her. Like all that she loves, when she senses the opposite



emotions, her body reacts. Trudy remains silent, it’s too much to bear right now. She knows that Donovan still has some time, but they do have a known time limit with him.

Donovan tells everyone his brother is coming here to watch the end of his life. There is something not fair about that, after all those years apart. The bile in Trudy’s stomach is churning up in furry. She runs out of the room and finds the closest bathroom. She doesn’t even know someone is in there until their hand is on her head holding her hair out of the way. When she is done, she sits down on the cool tile floor, a cold wash cloth is handed to her and she throws it on her face. She sits there, and sits.

A hand touches hers and places something on her palm. She knows that feeling very well. It’s a sugar cube. She rolls the cube in her fingers. In her other hand a glass of cold water is placed. Now she has to remove her wash cloth. She pops the sugar cube in her mouth and lets it melt, her eyes still closed, she takes a drink of the water. Calm is coming back to her, she opens her eyes. Not who she was expecting, but she is ok with this, always is. Only she has never expressed her feelings. Trudy knows how to get others to express their hearts, but she has the hardest time doing this for herself.

“A long time ago Cheryl told me why you carry these around. I thought you were crazy until I tasted one. It is truly the purest candy around. You ok now? I’m sure there are a few people concerned about you by the way you ran in here, I’m assuming you ran from them,” he says. “I heard what happened in the foyer.”

“I’m better now. Thanks. Any way we can sneak out of here?” she asks.

“No, not even if you went out the window,” he says, “come stand up, you don’t look as bad as you think. You can use this if you’d like,” he hands her a comb from his pocket.

“Thank you, I think I will,” Trudy washes her mouth out a couple times and drinks the rest of the water from the cup, she washes her face one more time and combs her hair then pulls it back using the pony tail holder from her pocket.

“You look fabulous. Sadness happens Trudy, you can’t internalize everything like that,” he says.

“I don’t, on purpose anyway,” she says looking at him sorrowfully

“I know, something we will work on,” he says as he opens the door so she can leave before him. This is the second time he said ‘we’ when talking to her, the word hasn’t gone unnoticed. Trudy is trying to figure out what he means though.

~ ~ ~

The picnic dinner and movie are exactly what everyone wanted and needed. Simple, yet a lot of fun at the same time. To watch the movie all together is a fun idea. Lights come back on and everyone looks around, it isn’t the regular lights that are on, it’s a whole stream of lights around where Cade and Donovan are sitting. Music starts and everyone begins to sing happy birthday. They haven’t spent a birthday together in years. Cheryl holds on to Trudy and Abby, “Best bachelorette party ever,” she says

xx

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The two brothers are shocked at the display before them, instead of one cake, with their current age, there are nine small cakes with all the years they need to make up for. They walk together down the large table and blow out all the candles. The crowd cheers on both sides of the pond. The various cakes are cut and distributed.

Cade gets everyone to be quiet for a moment, “Well, Cheryl thank you for inviting us to your bachelorette party and to you too Calvin,” he calls over and there is clapping on the other side, “It will please all of you to know we never lost touch over this supposed feud. We only lost face time. This is perfect, the games, the cakes the family. To family!!” he calls and raises his glass.

The other side of the pond yells, “To love!!!”

“Here, here!!!” everyone responds.

The picnic lasts for a little while after dessert but not much, everyone is tired and there is a wedding tomorrow set for high noon.

Trudy watches as the various family members join each other in hugs and happiness. She drinks this in because she feels the sadness too, she wants the happiness to overtake the sadness, she needs it to, her body is in conflict and this hurts her. She has to get through tomorrow in a positive way or her mood will affect the whole wedding. She begins to walk over to the smaller pond so she can meditate with nature and get her calm back.

Trudy sits on one of the boulders that she sat on before. She takes some deep breaths. Slow on the inhale, even slower on the exhale. She turns to face the pond and listens. Her eyes closed, she listens for the music of nature to calm her. First come the frogs, then some crickets ring in with their melody. She shivers at the cool breeze blowing on her neck, but then she is warmed by a jacket being put over her shoulders, she turns around and he puts his hand over his lips to show he won’t talk and neither should she. He sits on the boulder behind her, close up, his legs next to hers, his body next to her back to keep her warm, he rubs her arms to make sure the warmth is penetrating through the jacket. They sit together and listen, she rests her head back onto his chest, her eyes closed, finally she is able to relax. He sits and holds her. You can’t find a better peace, he thinks to himself.

~ ~ ~

The knock at the door awakens Trudy and Cheryl, then the voice, that voice only a good friend would have, “I brought the champagne!!! Who has the strawberries?” Harriet walks in with an already open bottle and three glasses.

“I left my crew downstairs with your mom and the ‘ladies’, so how much love are we spreading today?” she asks, “Trudy you look amazing as usual, and Cheryl, well you look like hell but hey that’s why I’m here to make you beautiful!” she exclaims.

“Really?” Cheryl asks in confusion.

“She is kidding right?” Harriet looks to Trudy to make sure Cheryl knows she is sarcastic.

“Cheryl realized today is her wedding day at about 4:30 this morning, we’ve been up ever since. I put in for blue skies and billowy clouds, pretty good results don’t you think?” Trudy asks.



“I’ll say. Listen, Cheryl I’ll do or not do whatever you want. How about we have a drink and at least do your nails, that’s relaxing. Oh, and if we do it by the window, we can watch that gorgeous black stallion that is hanging out by the tree,” Harriet says.

“He’s back?” Trudy gasps, she looks to Cheryl and Cheryl nods, “You’re the best,” Trudy kisses her friend on both cheeks and runs out the door.

Cheryl sits down at the desk and Harriet comes next to her to look out the window, Cheryl explains what has happened with the stallion and then she sits down to get her nails done with her good friend.

Trudy makes it outside and is breathless, “Oh, you came back,” She says softly and slows her pace to walk up to her four-legged friend. As she gets closer he lifts his head and nods up and down. She pulls out a sugar cube from her pocket and holds out her hand. The stallion comes to take it easily, then comes closer and puts his nose on her shoulder like a thank you.

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Trudy pets his neck and rubs it up and down, “Want to run today?” she asks him. The horse backs up. “Ok. Want to see your girlfriend?” she asks as she realizes the rope is still on him. She takes the rope and he allows her to lead him to the stables. The stable manager looks at her and smiles.

“Did he come on his own or did you run out to the woods to find him?” he chuckles.

“I saw him on the green and he asked for a sugar cube, but he doesn’t want to ride today but he does seem to want to be here though,” she says.

“Oh, well then, come here boy, let me check you out,” he takes the rope and leads the horse to a fence and he wraps the rope to show the horse he needs to stay put for a few minutes. The stable manager rubs down each leg to see if he is injured, not until he comes to the fourth leg does he see the gash. “Did you try and jump a fence? Or was this another animal? Never mind I don’t want to know. Trudy, you’re going to have to talk to his face while I wash down this leg, he has an injury that he may not like me touching. And Yes, I did ask him how it happened,” he says with a grunt.

“I told you to stay on this estate, they are the only ones who will help you. You have to listen to me, say you will listen,” she says. The horse nods again and rests his nose on her shoulder once more.

“Ok buddy, this is going to sting, try not to kick me,” the stable manager washes the wound and preps the gash with some medicine then he wraps it with some special gauze and comes back around to the front of the horse. “You’re a strong one all right. Others would have needed to sleep through that. You come back in a couple days and I’ll check on the healing,” he says as he unwraps the rope for the horse, he drops the rope to the floor, releasing him to go on freely.

The horse, the stable manager and Trudy all stand there looking at each other.

xx

Finally, the horse nods his head up and down and puts his nose on the manager’s shoulder this time. He rewards him with stroking his neck and standing still, and another sugar cube. He



pats the horse’s neck once more and steps away. The horse walks away as if he came to get treated and now that he is ok, he can leave.

“Don’t look at me like that, I don’t have enough time in the day to take care of the ones we have, let alone a stray who wants to visit once in a while,” he snarls at Trudy.

“You love him and you know it, there is too much inside you to deny him your affections. Is the wound bad?” Trudy asks.

“No, not particularly. But it should be watched. I’m an old fool talking to animals like people, but sometimes you feel you need to say what you’re thinking out loud,” he says.

“Not an old fool, you’re not even old and you’re certainly not a fool. I’ll bet in your day you were quite the lady’s man sir,” Trudy pulls herself up on her tip toes and kisses his cheek. “See you at the wedding, save me a dance,” she calls back to him as she leaves.

Trudy runs back to the main house to find Cheryl. “Ahhh, thanks Cheryl. Did you see him?” she asks.

“Yes, but you don’t look like you rode him, your hair is too neat,” she laughs.

“He came to get taken care of, he had a gash on his leg; your stable manager took care of him. I think they like each other. There is so much love in the air today Cheryl, you can feel the warmth, the birds are singing, the wind is whispering, I can’t believe you’re lucky enough to be married here,” Trudy says and plops down on the bed and falls backwards.

“Um, speaking of the wedding, are you planning on getting dressed?” Harriet looks to her smiling.

“Not a bad idea, before you know time has passed, the guests will be arriving and I have to do my maid of honor duties and keep them all away from the bride,” she laughs and the others join in too.

“Speaking of maid of honor duties, you need to bring Calvin his wedding gift from me,” Cheryl says.

“On it, I’ll get dressed right after, promise Harriet,” with that Trudy grabs the small box and runs out again, this time she is on a mission of love.

There is a knock at the door. “Well, hello. What are you doing on the girls’ side of the camp?” Cheryl asks.

“Look at these and tell me if I can convince her to stay, maybe permanently,” he waits and watches Cheryl.

“Oh my, oooo, oh my. You did these? This sums up everything about the place, oh and every picture is about love, you can feel the love by looking at what you’ve captured. Harriet look, be honest, I may be biased,” she hands the packet to Harriet

Harriet looks from her hand to Cheryl and back at her hand. “You have to show these to Donovan. You have to show them to your brother Cheryl, you could make a book of these alone and I’ll bet you every woman on the planet who likes a good love story will buy two copies. No explanation necessary,” she hands them back.

“You think your brother will like them?” he asks.

“He will be brutally honest, and if that’s what you want, then go ask, but I have a feeling his opinion won’t be much different from mine,” she gives her guest a kiss and closes the door.

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Harriet and Cheryl dance around the room, having Trudy here long term would make them so happy. Abby bursts in the door, “Did you see, wait what are you too smiling about and why wasn’t I called?” she says.

Cheryl fills her in quickly. Abby puts her hand to her heart, “Stay? Here at the estate? Oh Cheryl I couldn’t think of anyone I’d want to be a neighbor with more than her. Hell, I’d be her stable cleaner if she taught me how to love like she does. She loves with her whole body, doesn’t she?”

“It’s a blessing and a curse, by loving with all of you, the rest of you responds when emotions are negative too. Sadness is very hard for her and anger will rip her up physically. Remember Harriet that one time she was full blown angry at the unjust way the kids were being treated at the school she worked for?” Cheryl asks.

“Wanted to forget that scene. Abby, she was physically ill for three days afterwards. Three days, through and through. But of course, her love is what prevailed, when she remembered the reason she was working with them, she turned her anger around and created a solution for everyone. How much can a person love anyway?” Harriet asks.

“There are no limits,” Trudy says as she walks in and walks over to Cheryl, “This, my dear, is for you. Turn around,” Cheryl turns around and Trudy puts a necklace around her neck made of tiny pink pearls with simple rose gold flowers placed every couple of inches.

The necklace lays perfectly on Cheryl’s dress. The color, the size, the length. Cheryl looks to Trudy, “I said nothing, he told me he knew in his heart this would work with your dress,” Trudy answers.

Before he finds Cheryl’s brother he has to find one more person, he walks to the room he knows to be hers, “Mom? Can I come in? I have to show you something,” he says.

“Oh my dear boy, I didn’t think it was possible to capture someone’s heart in a picture. Look at Cade by the oak tree, and the girls by the pond,” she looks to her son, “Go, it must be done, today is a good day for such things, I can feel it,” she kisses him and he leaves smiling.

~ ~ ~

Watching Donovan as he walks his daughter down the aisle, standing tall and proud, hits Trudy’s heart loudly. It’s too bad her father won’t ever do this for her. He told her flat out that when she gets married he is coming as an invited guest not as someone to be pranced around. True to his word, he did the same thing for her brother’s wedding, so she knows he would do it for hers.

The reception tent looks amazing and everyone is having a great time. Abby has danced every dance with either Donovan or her uncle. The ‘ladies’ only danced when approached properly, which, in this crowd, wasn’t too often.

Cheryl’s mom walks around with an air of importance around here that everyone ignores because the people invited to this wedding were Calvin and Cheryl’s friends mostly and her father’s friends, plus a few select co-workers. No one is impressed by Cheryl’s mom. At one point she begins to get the message and she takes a seat near the other girls and stays there.

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Cade, Donovan and their sister Amy take turns dancing with each other and many of their guests. Next to the bride and groom, they are the happiest people in the room. Patrick and Dwain spend a lot of time with their cousins, Dwain with his wife and child as well, who is thankfully feeling much better.

Being true to herself, Trudy sneaks out from all of the people, to be with herself. She decides to walk back to the boulders by the frog pond as she has begun to call it. With no regard for the silk she is wearing, she sits on the edge of the boulder she sat on the previous evening, thinking of the sounds she heard as well as the arms she felt. Her eyes close.

A familiar body sits down behind her, hands rub up and down from her shoulders to her elbows and back again. An envelope lands on her lap. She opens it slowly, the first picture has her gasping, she is looking at the first time she met the stallion, now he is up on his hind legs, oh the strength she sees. Here she is with Cheryl watching the frogs, laughing on the boulders, now she sees Cheryl and Abby hugging, this one is exuding love. She rubs her hand over the two sisters hugging.

Here she is again up in the tree with Abby, now the butterfly on her shoulder, she is sleeping on the couch, now on a bench with Donovan in the dark. Trudy turns around quickly after looking at this next one, “How did you capture this?” she asks as she holds the picture of herself laying on the blanket stargazing with a tear running down her cheek.

“I told you a picture can capture true feelings, what is in a man’s heart, or a woman’s in this case,” he says as he brushes her hair from her face and puts it softly behind her ear.

“But these pictures are so real, you can feel them with your eyes, it reaches right through you. It’s not like other pictures,” she says.

“I’m not like other men,” he responds simply.

“You had to have been following me all this time, so early to capture the horse, so late to capture that tear. This whole time. I don’t understand,” she says, at this point Trudy’s nerves are on edge, and yet her comfort level couldn’t be higher. He was also the one who was with her in the bathroom and made her feel comforted without words.

“Cheryl asked me to capture what these few days are all about, and they are all about love are they not? There are some without you, but no need to show you those. You can view them later. I’ll make a nice album for the new couple,” he says.

“You had time to take more? You had time to make these? You thought I was important enough?” she asks choking a bit on her words. Loving everyone is easy to Trudy, loving herself not as much.

“Affection comes easy when you’re around my dear Trudy. I know you don’t want to leave here. You, like Cheryl, are inherently attached to this place. The feelings are internal, and it’s obvious,” he says.

“Denny, I have to go back home,” she says softly, another tear betraying her and falling down her cheek.

“That’s the first time you’ve used my name,” he says swallowing hard. Trudy has no words right now. “You know our initials, T.D. make an interesting acronym,” he looks into her eyes. She raises an eyebrow.

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"Tremendous Desire. That is what I feel for you Trudy Dillinger, I have since the day we met. I hope these pictures tell, no show you exactly how much," he says.

Trudy is frozen in her spot, she looks at Denny with new eyes, but her same heart. He has always pulled on her heart, yes, since the time they first met. She nods to him in acknowledgement of that.

"I want to see that happiness in you for the rest of our lives, I will never try and tame you but I will always love and appreciate you, you are lover personified and I'm hoping you can dedicate even a piece of your heart towards me. I want to be part of all that you love. If I had a ring, I'd give you one, but right now I only have these photographs I printed them at the 1-hour photo store this morning. I will make one other promise," he says pausing.

"What else could you give me, besides yourself," she asks warmly.

"This," he raises his hands, "we can live here on the estate with Cheryl, Calvin, Donovan, Cade, everyone. This side or the other side of the pond, whatever you want. I can give you this," he says.

Trudy's emotions are in many places right now but the only thing she can say for sure is that they are all coming from her heart, "Denny," she whispers, "Oh Denny," she says again and turns around more fully to reach up and kiss him. This time it's not a sweet cheek kiss, but one of tremendous desire, as he says.

Slowly Denny puts his arms around her and pulls her onto his lap. After a moment or two, he pulls away, "Is that a yes Trudy? Will you spend eternity with me here on the estate?" he asks.

"Eternity sounds perfect," Trudy answers and melds back into his arms.