

Chapter 7

Buying the Farm

So a year later Arnold Benison, widower, and Caroline Wunderlich Kitefly, divorcée, decided to take a second trip around the marital block and this one together. Theirs was to be a June wedding with all the trappings, the better to “do it right this time” as Carrie insisted, and Arnold readily agreed. He was the most agreeable of men, the most unassuming, even self-effacing; but also a solid rock and resting place for Carrie, who on her own had tended toward blindfold flightiness.

She and her only child, except for brief visits, had not cohabited under one roof since their abrupt departure from husband/father and the Santa Ana Marine Corps Air Station; but now Skeeter was to come and stay and not go away ever again, or at least not until she grew up: whichever came first.

*AR*nold, as Skeeter always called him, took shy pride in showing off his stepdaughter-to-be, and never minded when she’d justify her status by breaking into a tapdance or cakewalk. But he shelved tentative adoption plans out of deference to Major Gower the Jimmy Cagney look-alike; so in name as well as nature, Skeeter remained the Kitefly she was born to be.

Though not in Marble Orchard. Come June she would be moving to the Benison manse in Demortuis, and this brought no joy to Gramma Addie Otto. Losing her little hawney to the bright lights of a middlesized city! A gaping vacancy would be left in heart and at hearthside—though not, perhaps, for long. Great-Aunt Emmy would be (*might be*)

seeing to that, despite her eyes not being quite what they once were, and small wonder too after forty years on the Demortuis *Daily Memorial* copy desk.

Fully retired now, high time too at sixty-nine, and if Emmy never had to read another reporter's gobbledegook it'd be double soon enough for her. Retirement, raising the question of what to do with one's days—soon answered, with Addie being left to rattle around Marble Orchard all by her lonesome. Just when *she* needed a little looking after, too: only sixty-five, but beginning to act vague and twittersome. Not that Addie ever could come to the point without taking all day about it. And you could scarcely count dumb animals as company, especially not that cat—"Margaret" was it?—which had an unnatural pop-eyed look.

Only went to show what having children got you. Couldn't expect diddly from Carrie, with her track record: throwing away her hardbought college education to bat lashes at a would-be spaceman, then (after dropping Gower like the botched potato he was) unloading her daughter on the Ottos and dancing up the next five years like a good-time girl. Five years! And now she and her *second* husband were reclaiming Kelly Rebecca and depriving poor Addie of what little companionship she did have.

Nor could you expect much from Ollie, who'd never had any smarts to throw away in the first place: birdbrained from the word go, settling right out of high school for a truck driver who grunted no more than twenty words a year and even mumbled grace at Thanksgiving so you scarcely knew when to say Amen. No, forget about Ollie and Walt Hungerford; their hands were full enough getting their own bratboys out of delinquent scrapes every weekend. (Though Mickey the eldest would come home for good before the spring was out, after buying the farm in Cambodia.)

And then there was Bertram L. Jr. alias Buddy alias "Buzz," whose idea of a grown man's career was to prowl around theater catwalks, and him overweight as his late father to boot. Never mentioned any girlfriends either, and Lordy you knew what *that* implied.

So much for children. Undependable, one and all; might as well have stuck to raising chickens. Never in her life had Emily Wunderlich found the slightest use for flightiness. No, down-to-earthiness was what she put stock in; planting both feet firmly on the ground.

Obviously it would be up to her to see to everything—looking after Addie and her animals, managing the rattly Victorian family homestead in Marble Orchard. Ever methodical, Emmy wanted to give the town a good proofread before finalizing negotiations; and this she came to do one weekend in mid-April, that being one of the few tolerable times (the other being mid-October) for outdoor inspection of Good Old Heartland USA.

Emmy had a walking tour all mapped out. They would head downtown, stroll around Market Square (where the Booth County Courthouse clocktower proclaimed perpetual quarter-to-four) and take a good look at it all. The Wunderlich Bros. grocery, absorbed long ago by A & P; the Dairy Queen that used to be the drygoods place where Aunt Claudia'd kept the books; the ShortKut convenience store on whose site, in former times, had been the boarding house where Uncle Willie'd lived so many years.

“What was his landlady's name? Penrod? Dunlap?”

“No—Mrs. *Damrell*. Widow of a livery stableman.”

“That's right,” said Addie. “Oh, I'll always remember Grandma finding Uncle Willie's deck of cards. He was feeling poorly, had a touch of flu—”

“Grippe,” said Emmy. “She always called it the grippe.”

“So she did. Suitcases, too. Anyhow we took him over some soup and jelly and a mustard plaster. ‘Bachelors won't take care of themselves,’ you know, and lo and behold Grandma found this deck of cards. ‘William! What's this *deck of cards* doing in your chest of drawers?’ And Uncle Willie, forty if he's a day, said ‘I play *solitaire*, Mama' ... Not a sweeter man ever lived than Uncle Willie.”

“Grandma always called him a lazybones and that's just what he was. Frittering and frivolling his way through life.”

“Hum,” said Addie.

Women have to be strong because if you don't keep an eye on men every minute, they lose themselves in shiftlessness. So Frieda Wunderlich had taught her daughters and granddaughters, and Emmy for one had found it true as true. Those editors at the *Daily Memorial!* Running around half the time like so many King Charleses with their heads cut off.

But like all maxims it could be taken to extremes. Look at Aunt Claudia! Abrasive teetotal temperament. Chivvying that dull tool Uncle Ned into an early grave; then went more than a little batty herself. Took to visiting Rosewood Cemetery every day, joining all the funerals and acting as permanent star mourner. Umm umm umm.

And dear old Aunt Livy, who'd spent her entire life caring for others—even she lost her grip towards the end, and I don't mean the flu or a suitcase either. Getting down on hands and knees at eighty-three, to teach the Hungerford boys how to shoot marbles properly. Lordy! That had been a sight to give a body pause.

“Did you know Kelly named her guinea pig after him?”

“After whom?”

“Why, Uncle Willie. I think he would have liked that.”

“*Who* would have?”

“Why, Uncle Willie...”

Time, all too obviously, was getting on; they had best be on their way. Was it warm enough to go out without a sweater? And what was Addie calling up the stairs?

“Kelly hawney, we're leaving! And you're coming along—oh yes you are, young lady!”

“Not now, Gramma, I'm PRACTicing.”

(Skeeter had discovered a ukulele in the attic, and on this relic of Grampa Otto's courting days she could plink out a facsimile of “Singin' in the Bathtub,” unless it was supposed to be “Singin' in the Rain.”)

“She is going to *have* to leave that be while I'm here,” Emmy announced. Whatever else happened, she was not about to move back to Marble Orchard until her plinking little great-niece had moved well out.

It distressed Addie that Skeeter seemed to feel no regrets about leaving her home, her schoolmates from grades one through five, even her beloved cat and long-sought, finally-got ponies. Regrets? Skeeter was shamelessly involved in plans for her own going-away party, egging her friends on to vaster extravagances, wishing aloud that she could leave a dozen times so they could plan a dozen such sendoffs.

“Okay!” she’d run home to inform Gramma, “here’s the latest: I’m going to hitch the ponies up to Jeff’s uncle’s neighbor-that-used-to-be-a-milkman’s cart, and do it up like Cinderella’s pumpkin, right? and get driven to school my last day, and be *hahnded* out at the door in this red velvet gown cut low front ‘n’ back—”

“Absolutely not!” her mortified grandmother would say. Not that there was a lot for a lowcut gown to show in either direction yet.

Skeeter did not disguise her lack of patience with having to “look upon” Market Square. She’d seen it every week for the past five years; the place was carved as though in stone in her memory. And besides, she wasn’t leaving town for six whole weeks yet and then she’d be coming back to visit later that summer and any old time in the future, so what was the point?

“I gotta take a ride on the wee-wee train,” she reported from upstairs.

“*Where* does she pick up those horrid phrases?” Emmy wanted to know. Television, she supposed; rock ‘n’ roll. Still and all, a wise precaution: the lack of a good clean accessible public toilet for women on weekends in Market Square was too well known. A disgrace, in Emmy’s opinion, considering this was the county seat. You could stand in line at the Courthouse or you could develop concentration. Men, of course, didn’t seem to mind more squalid outlets.

“Daddy used to go in Rosewood,” Addie recalled as they waited on the front porch. “He’d find some tombstone away from everybody and stand up close, like he was praying, and just go.”

“Addie! Don’t give the child ideas!”

“Oh, she can’t hear us out here.”

They stared awhile down Tawe Street with its double row of blossoming trees, all pink and white and scenic.

“Exquisite. Always is, every spring. When I was no older than Kelly they looked just the same.”

“Trees weren’t as tall then,” Emmy objected.

“Well, neither were we. I guess we all kind of grew up together.”

Sixty springs before, in pinafores dyed black, they had been brought to the House With All the Porches to be raised by their grandmother, who'd borne seven of her own and buried two in Rosewood. Sixty showery Aprils later, and the trees *were* taller. Some superannuated, like the twin oaks out back. Others planted by Gustav Wunderlich, whose abruptly-pointed chin had been passed down unto the fourth generation and sharpened even Skeeter's roundish jaw. That big shade tree on the front lawn: planted in memory of firstborn George, who'd died of typhoid. The goodsized sycamore nearby: for the original Emily Wunderlich, who'd succumbed to TB at the age of twelve.

When Bert Otto married Addie, he moved in and took over caring for the lawns and garden, never reluctant to boast of the results. Bert's trees were planted on birthdays: a flowering dogwood by the back porch for each of the children, Ollie and Carrie and Buddy; three crab apples for the three Hungerford grandsons, in a row near the old chicken house that had survived the grandsons's attempts to blow it up with cherry bombs. And out by the brook, overlooking the railroad tracks: a redbud sapling for Kelly Rebecca.

Who was still loitering upstairs, plink-plank-plunking her ukulele, when Emmy and Addie came back indoors.

"Well, we might as well put our feet up while we wait for her," said Emmy, sitting down at the kitchen table. She took off her sunglasses, produced a stoppered vial and put in her eyedrops, glaring ceilingwards all the while.

"Warm today," sighed Addie.

"Hum?"

"Going to be an early summer, maybe."

Emmy was in no position to shoot her sister a glance as Addie attended to two small bowls, one of German chocolate squares, the other of Kraft caramels. "Too much for my bridgework, of course. But Kelly likes them. Eats them as though there's no tomorrow." Her strong old ex-nurse's fingers lingered on the bowlrim, running round and round it in a twiddly circle.

"I could use an iced tea, Addie. Or some lemonade."

“Oh—yes. There’s lemonade...” Calling up the stairs: “Kelly? Want a glass of lemonade?”

“Sure!”

“Well, come down and get it if you’ve still got legs! I’m not climbing all those steps just to play waitress.”

“I should think not,” said Emmy, and put away her drops.

Skeeter and ukulele galloped downstairs, the one to fill a glass and noisily empty it. “But it’s so goood,” she said when admonished.

“Well, that’s so,” said Gramma Addie. “Lemonade does do a body good. So does coming home; there’s no place like it.” And she added some highly original sentiments about your heart’s desire being in your own back yard, because if you couldn’t find it there, you hadn’t really lost it in the first place.

“That,” said Great-Aunt Emmy, “doesn’t make a *speck* of sense.”

Skeeter, far from realizing sensibility, was chainpopping caramels when there came the *wooooot* of a freight train’s approach. Gramma and Emmy automatically checked the kitchen clock. Hum. Getting later and later it was. And there the child went, running down to the brook to wave at the passing caboose. Always was a flighty child. She’ll be her mother and the rest of them all over again; mark my words.

“YAH-HOO!” went Skeeter, excited as ever by trainroar. And mingled with it was a squoinketing *eeeenh* like the sound of a ukulele string breaking.

