

## Butterfly Grange

It wasn't the sound of a rooster that woke Roy Henderson from his peaceful slumber. Rather it was the repeated whimpering of his Border Collie, Duke, that seeped into his ears and disrupted the pleasant dreams he was having. The sound of the dog's crying was something Roy could not ignore or tolerate for very long, as he had a soft spot for Duke and sometimes felt guilty about being neglectful to his longtime companion of nearly thirteen years. Duke was on the older side, but he was still reliable, obedient, and strong—the very traits required for running and maintaining a farm. He even reminded Roy that it was time to wake up and get the day started, when otherwise his master would have overslept for who knows how long.

Roy ran his fingers behind Duke's ears and said, "What would I do without you?"

Then he lifted himself out of bed and walked over to the window. As he stretched his arms, working out the kinks in his middle-aged muscles, he looked through the glass onto acres of land illuminated by the orange tint of the ascending sun. It all belonged to him—Butterfly Grange.

Roy was a breeder and one of the best, just like his father and grandfather before him. Customers came from all over to purchase his Mares. And while he didn't look the type, Roy had plenty of money because of his successful family business. He wasn't a greedy man and never let his wealth define him; he put most of his profits into the grange to keep it running with top-of-the-line equipment and necessities. He felt blessed to be earning a living doing what he loved, and his passion focused only on the farm.

Certainly Roy's money didn't go into his clothes: he was still wearing the same

hole-filled, stained pajamas that he'd been using for the last decade or so. To him, they were comfortable enough to sleep in, so there was no need to get another pair. A stranger, though, would have thought Roy was some unfortunate soul who struggled to put food in his stomach day in and day out.

After feeling the last crack of his outstretched elbow, Roy remembered he planned on making an important sale to a customer later in the day, but first the morning rituals had to be done. He threw on whatever work clothes were laying around closest to him, be it on the floor or bed, and went down stairs to give Duke his morning breakfast before he ate his own, along with a cup of coffee. Once Roy and Duke had finished their meals, the time came to give the Mares their food.

Roy grabbed a bucket of feed and went out to the massive stable where he kept his Mares. There were men out there who were jealous of his property and would do anything to take it for themselves, so Roy had installed a thick padlock on the stable doors and erected a wired wooden fence surrounding the entire grange, as well as scattering signs reading "Private Property" and "Do Not Enter" throughout the forest nearby. If those precautions weren't enough, Duke's jaws and Roy's double-barreled shotgun would do away with anyone looking to steal or harm his precious Mares. It had happened a few times in the past, and Roy never hesitated to do what was necessary when protecting his property. The results never weighed heavily on his conscience either. Any man who felt entitled to what Roy had worked so hard for deserved a burial plot in the fields of Butterfly Grange.

Roy dug through his pockets and grabbed the key for the thick padlock. After a

single turn it unlatched, letting Roy pull open the stable door and allowed the rising suns light to shine on the entire herd of beautiful Mares dwelling within.

“Feeding time, everybody. Sorry I kept you waiting,” he said.

Talking to the Mares made Roy feel connected with them. He treated them with respect, as if they were people, and the interactions they shared were so emotionally and physically bonding that he considered them to be his family.

“Here you go, Beth, darling,” he said, opening the first stable and making his way inside. He poured the feed into a dish on the ground before cleaning and filling the water bowl. Then he gave the Mare a couple of pats on the head and rubbed her neck while she ate.

The feed itself was unique, a secret family recipe that had been refined over decades of the grange’s history. It included nothing but the best ingredients, blended into a mixture of protein, vegetables, fruits, and carbohydrates—everything the body needed and not a single calorie too many or too few. Roy made sure that the Mares at Butterfly Grange were not only well fed but possessed bodies reflecting the epitome of perfection: strong bones, radiant and colorful manes, and figures without an ounce of excess fat on their lean, toned muscles. The Mares needed to be bred and raised this way if they were going to be the highest quality money could buy, and Roy ensured that every phase of their rearing and training was spared no expense. Butterfly Grange had a stellar reputation to maintain, and Roy would be damned if that ever changed during his running of the family business.

Sure, there was nothing new about breeding; it was done all over the world. But

Roy had customers who came from far and wide for his selection of Mares, thanks to their refined allure and the training that made them “ready to ride,” so that buyers wouldn’t have to break them in on their own. Over the years, the Henderson clan had discovered a technique of training Mares through a brutal but necessary regimen, forcing them into a state of complete obedience in which they were eager to be ridden and permanently loyal to their new owners. Roy was selling the perfect product to anyone who could afford it. His Mares allowed themselves, on his command, to be ridden by anyone, regardless of the rider’s age or experience, with no resistance whatsoever. That alone separated Butterfly Grange from all the other breeding farms and put it leagues above the rest.

After Roy finished giving each of the Mares their morning greeting and breakfast, the time came to start milking the few Heifers he kept in the stable. He grabbed his trusty old wooden stool from the side of the first stall, sat down, and took a look at Sasha’s swollen teats. They were definitely full; he could see the milk dripping out from even the slightest movements of her body. Not wanting any of the milk to go to waste, he placed the tin bucket under her, rolled up his sleeves, and hunched over, grabbing one of her teats. With a firm pull, he squeezed until the white fluid sprayed out, hitting the tin barrel so forcefully that the sound echoed through the stable. He repeated the process, opening his moist palms wide over the large soft flesh and then gliding downward, following the blue veins that converged at the nipple’s tip.

She let out a cry and tried to pull away because of how roughly he was handling her, but Roy wasn’t having any of it. “Come on, Sasha. I don’t have time for this again.

It's not so bad." He spoke unapologetically, one hand squeezing the teat even harder than before while the other guided her body back to his.

Roy knew how to milk a Heifer and had done it to countless others before Sasha. Resistant behavior was normal when a Heifer was new to being milked. The process required a certain methodology. Although Roy loved Sasha, he was rigid in his way of doing things because it produced results, and he would not be compromised. What mattered was getting every last drop of milk in a timely fashion so that he could tend to the rest of his duties, not being soft and catering to her needs during such a routine task. Every creature at Butterfly Grange had to learn his way, and that could be either an easy or a difficult process for them. Regardless, they had to obey Roy.

Sasha had been making a fuss despite her need for a good milking, and Roy told himself that she was too stubborn and dumb to understand that what he was doing was for her own sake. Not only that, but Sasha's milk might as well have been liquid gold around the farm. It was an absolute necessity for the growth and development of the newborns, since the feed alone would be too hard for them to digest. It was all part of Roy's calculated process for raising the ideal Mare.

Once finished, Roy grabbed the tin bucket and went to the next stall, where his Broodmare, Daisy, looked and sounded as if she were finally ready to give birth. Roy was so excited that he immediately placed the bucket of milk on the ground, grabbed a clean sheet off the sidewall, and placed it underneath her.

"Nice and easy. Breathe, Daisy," Roy directed her.

He made sure to keep his voice low, letting her know that everything was going to

be okay. Some Broodmares were able to give birth with ease while others struggled for hours, so Roy always reassured them with gentle touches and encouraging comments. He could see the little newborn emerging from Daisy as she wailed in pain.

Birthing was painful for the Broodmares, but it was something else entirely for Roy. There wasn't much commotion around Butterfly Grange aside from the day-to-day upkeep, but delivering newborns made all the hard work worth it for him. Everything he and his family had built depended on breeding, and it started with a mother pushing out new life and her master helping her through it every step of the way.

As blood and afterbirth spilled out of Daisy, Roy maintained his composure. Anticipation of what was to come surged through every vein in his body. Roy saw the head come through first, and he was careful to cup his hand around it, leading the rest of the body out. The act made him feel like Christ himself; before he knew it a newborn had entered the world and was resting in his arms.

Suddenly the white light of joy that had filled him mere seconds ago was snuffed out at the sight of the newborn's groin. There Roy saw an appendage, the unmistakable sign of a male. Staring at the tiny member, Roy cursed at the disappointment of this birth. He held his head low and shook it while taking a deep breath. "Goddamn it. I can't believe this..."

If there was one flaw about Butterfly Grange, it was that no owner had yet mastered the technique of breeding only females. Like everyone in the trade, the Hendersons had tried to discover how to control the outcome of a birth, but, while Butterfly Grange's ratio of female to male newborns was extremely high, it wasn't

perfect. Roy worked diligently in the hope of figuring out the secret, like so many others, but what was in his arms proved that he still had a long way to go.

A male was no good to Roy at this stage in his life. It couldn't be sold to anyone because of the zero value males had in the market, and, with no other place for it to go, there was only one thing to do.

Roy took the knife from his bootstrap and cut the umbilical cord. Then he walked away with the newborn in his arms and whistled for Duke. As they left the stable, the newborn's cries and those of its mother filled the air, lamenting their separation, but that didn't change the disgruntled curl of Roy's lips.

The only creature who was happy and excited about the upset was Duke, who kept jumping to sniff the little one's bloody limbs. This was a very special occasion for old Duke: whenever Roy walked out to the field with a newborn, the dog got to partake in a ritual that had first started when he was a puppy. Age hadn't ruined the experience in the least. If anything, it had just gotten better with the passing years.

The anticipation became almost too much, and Duke stuck his tongue out, trying to get a lick of red fluid off the newborn's flesh. But Roy wouldn't let him spoil the tradition. "Down, boy! Be patient." They were just a few yards from the field, and soon the dog would get his reward.

Roy stopped just before the long grass, and Duke sat waiting at his side. He took one last look at the tiny male in his arms, as it stretched its limbs out in the air, trying to touch something, anything, for comfort. But Roy was not its mother and had nothing to offer it. Looking upon Roy's face, the newborn saw only the man's frustration.

Roy lowered both his arms and then hurled the newborn as far as he could. He saw it disappear into the long grass, followed by a faint thud. “Go get it, Duke! All yours.”

Instantly Duke sprinted into the grass, sniffing for the scent of blood and in no time he found it. First he discovered the head and opened his jaws wide, taking the whole skull into his mouth. His tongue ran across the skin, and the taste of blood caused him to snap his teeth closed and crush the bones, releasing the juicy, tender brains. Warm, silky crimson flooded his tastebuds, and Duke writhed in pure ecstasy as he kept biting and devouring his treat. Quickly he moved down to the body, relishing the salty fat he remembered so well, and feasted on every part.

This was the fate that awaited newborn males as well as their mothers, if they bore too many failures at Butterfly Grange. Any disfigured or sickly births were a sign that a Mare’s reproductive system wasn’t healthy, and then the only merciful thing to do was to put her down along with the young one. Roy would kill a Mare with his shotgun nice and fast, letting Duke go at her afterward, but ammo wasn’t worth wasting on a newborn male. They hadn’t been alive long enough anyway, and the pain they suffered would surely be over quickly. Roy didn’t think of himself as a sadist; it was just how the way things were run on his farm.

Roy watched as Duke finished his snack and tried to focus on the fact that, while male births were always disappointing, at least something good came from them. Making Duke happy pleased Roy, especially after his companion ran back to him, tongue out, and he saw the red covering the dog’s mouth in a grin.

The moment was shattered by a piercing howl that echoed through the air and made Roy's head snap up. The dog wasted no time, springing toward the nearby woods and barking as he disappeared among the trees. Roy believed that such a noise could mean only one thing—someone was sneaking around illicitly on his land.

With his heart pounding, Roy ran back to the house as fast as he could to retrieve his double-barreled shotgun, then used Duke's barking as a compass to guide him past the fields and into the woods. He kept his weapon gripped tightly in hand, and when he finally caught up with Duke, he saw the dog snarling at something out of sight behind a massive tree. Erring on the side of caution, he lifted his gun, his eyes looking down the barrel as he approached. Duke continued his ferocious growls, almost drowning out the sounds of pain coming from the ensnared trespasser.

Once Roy had slowly circled around the gigantic tree, however, he saw one of his Mares, Lana, huddled on the ground, terrified. Though Duke continued to snarl mere inches away from her, Roy let out a sigh of relief and lowered his shotgun.

One of Lana's ankles had been caught in one of the many traps Roy had planted in the forest to catch intruders. The device worked much like a bear trap, except that the teeth had been filed down so as not to sever limbs or cause intense bleeding, which greatly reduced the chances of a life-threatening injury. And just as the traps kept the wrong people from getting in, they also kept Roy's Mares from getting out.

Lana had somehow scampered away from the stable while Roy was giving Duke his special treat. How she had managed to get out of her stall was puzzling, but Roy would have to figure that out later.

Lana was the latest addition to Butterfly Grange, and Roy had been trying to break her in for quite some time. She was a wild one, possessing a fire he hadn't seen in a while, but he was always up to the challenge of showing a newcomer who was boss.

Still, that didn't stop him from being mad as hell about her escape. "Now look what you gone and did to yourself! I should just leave you out here for doing something so stupid. Come on, boy!"

Roy called for Duke, and they both began walking away. Within a few seconds, Roy heard Lana's whimpers—she was scared that she'd be left to die out in the wilderness, a victim to nature's cruelty. He stopped and turned around. She was trying to limp toward him, but couldn't get close with the trap still clamped on her ankle. The look in her eyes showed that she had learned her lesson about what happened when she wandered off without his guidance. Now Roy had to get her back to the stable and care for the ankle before an infection set in.

He walked up the frightened Mare and said, half sympathetically, "All right, let's get you out of this." Then he knelt down, grabbed both sides of the trap, and carefully began prying it open.

Duke stayed close by Lana and growled, keeping his fangs bare, just in case she tried to make a run for it once Roy freed her. If that happened, Duke would make her regret it and she'd never be able to run away again—that much was certain.

When the trap's mouth seemed to have opened wide enough, Lana eagerly tried to ease her pain by jerking her ankle out. But this impatience came at a price: her quick movement caught Roy off guard, forcing the inner web of skin between his thumb and

index finger against one of the trap's teeth, which sliced it open.

*"Gahhh!"* he cried, pulling his hand back and grabbing it with the other.

Duke went wild, barking at Lana, ready to tear her apart. Roy was a second away from allowing him to do it, but in the midst of his fury he was able to pull his attention away from Lana and observe the cut on his hand. Not much blood had been drawn, so it would be nothing to worry about. It was more painful than deep. Other than the minor annoyance of feeling a sharp sting every now and then, it wouldn't get in the way of his work on the grange.

Though Roy was infuriated, he still had to tend to Lana's injury. She kept her ankle up close to her body, but he needed to see how much damage had been done. By this point, his patience had worn thin, so he reached out and grabbed her, making her wince in pain while trying to pull away. She stopped immediately, however, when Duke let out another flood of barks and snarls, terrifying her into submission.

"Keep an eye on her, boy," Roy ordered.

The dog remained alert, never letting his eyes stray from Lana. Roy could see that the skin on her ankle had been cut, but no bones were broken, thankfully. He slowly guided her all the way back to the stable, with Duke following close behind.

After placing her in her stall, Roy noticed that, after he had fed her breakfast, her gate hadn't closed all the way—the latch had become so loose over the years that it didn't securely lock. It was nothing a simple replacement couldn't fix, but, nevertheless, it was an oversight that had caused both Roy and Lana to suffer consequences. Due to her little escapade, she was going to need time to heal, and if she didn't recover completely, the

odds were that no one was going to pay decent money for a limping Mare. If that happened, Roy would have to think of another way to make use of her.

After gathering all the medical supplies in the stable, he began cleaning Lana's wound. "It's your own fault, you know," he said. "If you had just stayed put where you belong, like all the others, this wouldn't have happened." With a fresh bandage wrapped around Lana's ankle, all that remained was to let time take its course. He watched her limb gently touch the ground and stroked her hair. "You have it good here. I'm the only one who'll take care of you like this. Other breeders would have just put you down. Understand?" He knew Lana couldn't comprehend the seriousness of what he was saying, but that didn't stop his compassion for her.

There was only silence from the timid Mare; she held her head low. Roy knew that this was the sign of obedience and understanding he had been waiting for, and it satisfied him. He got up and, after exiting Lana's stall, closed the gate and shook it firmly, making certain the latch was properly locked in place. Then he headed over to the house and washed the blood and dirt off his arms before cleaning the cut on his hand.

Just as he had finished wrapping a torn white cloth around his wound, he glanced through the window above the sink and saw a pick-up truck heading down the dirt road toward the farm. Looking at the clock, he realized that it was almost noon already and the appointment with his customer had almost slipped his mind.

For friends and strangers alike, Roy was a man of professionalism and prided himself on punctuality. He wanted to make the best impression possible in this case, not only for the sale, but in order to live up to the reputation of Butterfly Grange. No

customer was too big or too small, and treating each one with respect was the key to being a successful businessman, as Roy's father had taught him.

Even though the commotion earlier had made Roy lose track of time, he still had enough spare minutes to wash himself off and meet his customer at the front gate, as he had planned. He unlocked the gate and opened it wide before waving the truck down. Two friendly honks sounded from the vehicle, and within a few moments the rusted black truck, along with its rear trailer for transporting livestock, came to a halt in front of the house. Its thick rubber tires ground against the rocks underneath them as the dust rose and spread.

The driver, Marvin Sherwood, was an old acquaintance of Roy, and approached him with much enthusiasm along with an open hand. "Roy! Good to see ya again!"

As Roy's pale fingers grasped Marvin's ebony hand, he made sure to give it a good firm shake. "Always a pleasure, Marvin. How you been?"

"Doing great. My boy's here, and we can't wait to see what you got. Ain't that right, Anthony?"

Marvin turned around, and from his truck came a child no more than thirteen years old. He was dark and lean, like his father, but kept his head low as he shyly approached the two adults.

"Is that you, Anthony?" said Roy. "Grown tall since the last time I saw you."

Anthony said nothing, and Marvin spoke sharply to his son, annoyed by his timid nature. "Don't be disrespectful, Anthony. Say something to the man."

Clearly fearing the consequences if he remained silent, Anthony replied, "Hello,

Mr. Henderson.”

Roy could see that the boy was uncomfortable, so he said encouragingly, “Don’t be nervous, Anthony. Every boy has his first ride sooner or later.”

Marvin scoffed. “You’d think the kid would be more fired up about riding. I don’t know what the hell’s got him all shook up. I wasn’t afraid during my first time and couldn’t wait to ride as soon as my old man showed me how it was done. I’ve told this one he ain’t a boy no more and can’t be scared with Mares if he’s gonna be a true rider.”

“Your father’s right, son. If you want to ride, then you have to be fearless. That’s what they respond to—confidence. A rider who acts like he knows what he’s doing even when he doesn’t. If you can’t get them to respect you, then you might as well get off and let someone else have them. Is that what you want? For somebody to take what’s yours ’cause you didn’t claim it?”

“I dunno...” Anthony whispered, still looking down.

Roy noticed the baseball cap on the boy’s head and quickly snatched it off. This awoke Anthony out of his apathy. He stared at the hat, the exact reaction Roy wanted.

“You want this back?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s mine!” Anthony cried out.

“If it’s truly yours, then take it. That’s what a real man does when he sees something that he wants. He makes it his, even if he has to fight for it.”

Roy held his hand out with the hat firmly in his grasp, tempting Anthony. The

young boy turned to his father, hoping to get some kind of support, but he was met with nothing more than crossed arms and expectations.

“Don’t look at me, boy. I ain’t gonna help you. This is your problem.”

Anthony turned back and looked at his hat, mere inches away. Anger started to swell within him as he became frustrated, feeling trapped and helpless. Soon the rage filled his mind to the point where he wasn’t thinking straight—his hat was all he wanted, regardless of the repercussions. Thrusting his hand out, he ripped it away from Roy.

After a moment of silence, Roy knelt down and met Anthony at eye level. The young boy was still unable to face him directly, so Roy demanded, “Look at me.” When the boy obliged, he went on, “Remember, there are two types of men in this world—those who ride and those who get ridden. Which are you?”

Anthony placed the cap back on his head and replied, “I’m a rider.”

“That’s what we want to hear!” Roy said happily. “Come on. I have just the perfect one I want you to meet.”

The tension evaporated, as did Anthony’s ire; he felt accepted now and comfortable with his male elders.

Roy placed his hand on the young boy’s shoulder and led him inside the stable, while Marvin followed behind, cheerful now that his son had finally embraced manhood. Duke rested at the entrance, on guard while his master worked the customers.

Seeing so many Mares, all neatly categorized, left Marvin and Anthony speechless. Roy talked about each one of them, outlining their histories as well his experience of riding them all. He went into exquisite detail about their personalities and

explained which ones he had purchased, bred, or traded with other breeders. Marvin and his son simply listened, letting Roy guide them until they came to a row of stalls containing Fillies, females much younger than the other Mares. These piqued Marvin's curiosity.

“Jeez, Roy, you even got babies here? Shit, these ain't no bigger than Anthony.”

Roy chuckled. “Some of them are even younger than your boy there. Got to get them while they're young. Easier to train, so when they're mature enough, they can handle riding with anyone.”

Anthony put his hand inside one of the stalls, and a Filly named April caught sight of him. She became very excited, quickly making her way towards the bars. Curious, she went close to his black skin and began sniffing it. After a few seconds, she started licking his palm over and over again. Anthony petted her and ran his hand through her mane. April moved her head closer and pressed her cheek against the metal, trying to offer as much of herself to Anthony's touch as possible.

Anthony was overjoyed by the Filly's reaction to his affection. “Hey, Dad, look!” he exclaimed.

“See, you're already becoming a pro!” his father said.

“Can I have this one, Dad?”

Before Marvin could answer, Roy cut in. He reached out and gently moved Anthony's hand away from April. “I'm sorry, Anthony. These ones aren't for sale. They're still too young and have no experience with riding yet. I have a lot of work to do with them before they're ready to be sold.”

“But she likes me so much,” the young boy said, disappointed.

“Riding has nothing to do with them liking you. It’s about which of you has the experience and control. Together, you and this Filly here have none at all, and that’s a recipe for disaster. But it won’t be that way with the one I’ve picked out especially for you. Come this way—I’ll take you to her.”

The boy couldn’t resist turning his head as they walked away from the young Filly, who kept her eyes locked on him.

As they moved toward the other end of the stable, Marvin and Anthony noticed that these Mares were different, much larger and more well-behaved, standing quietly in their stalls. Not so much as a whisper came from any of them, and the only movement was the rustling of their bodies changing positions and the occasional sway of manes.

Finally, Roy reached the Mare he had chosen for his customers. After undoing the latch on her stall, he ushered Marvin and Anthony inside. “Here she is, Anthony. Just for you. Her name is Scarlett.” Roy held his hands out, presenting the gorgeous Mare.

Scarlett radiated a warmth that could be felt within seconds of laying eyes on her. Hardened through training, she had fully embraced what many breeders believed to be a Mare’s natural state. Her brown mane was a wonder to behold, along with the perfect shape of her limbs, toned after many years of riding and training from her master. She was truly a flawless specimen, not only for Anthony but for any new rider looking to learn.

As she inched closer, Anthony reached out and brushed his palm gently across Scarlett’s face. Her presence was very welcoming, but, in tune with Anthony’s hesitation,

she knew not to rattle the boy and instead to let him approach at his own pace. Her focus was completely on him. Although she was to be his gentle teacher, she let him feel that he was the dominant one, raising his confidence.

Roy and Marvin looked on as Scarlett and Anthony continued their introduction, both men feeling that it had been a successful one.

“You see, Anthony, what did I say? She’s perfect for you. More mature and experienced with riding, and she’s been ready for you all week! The way you’re buttering her up now, she’s just ready to be taken home.” Roy gave Marvin’s shoulder a gentle pat as he spoke.

“I’ll say! They look like they were made for each other,” Marvin replied. He glanced at Roy’s cloth-covered hand and at the brown blots that had been absorbed into the fabric. “Looks like a nasty cut you got there, Roy. What happened?”

“Oh, this? It’s nothing. A Mare got out of her stall this morning and gave me a hard time.”

“One of these got the better of you? Oh, I gotta see which one it was!”

Not one to take himself too seriously, Roy thought that he could use this as a way to clinch the sale. “Yeah, all right. I’ll take you to her.” He turned to Anthony, who was still petting Scarlett. “Me and your dad are going to talk business while you get to know her a little better. Think you can handle that, boy?”

“Yes, sir.” Anthony nodded at him before turning back to the Mare.

Roy led Marvin to the other side of the stable, out of sight from Anthony and Scarlett. Marvin was expecting some kind of wild beast, with a ferocity that required the

steel bars, but, much to his surprise, what he saw was an average-looking Mare in a corner with a bandaged wound. “This is the pain in the ass you were talking about? Hell, she doesn’t look like much.”

“Yeah, ’cause that ankle of hers is all torn up now. The little devil managed to get out of her stall and run into the forest, trying to escape. Ended up getting caught in one of the traps I laid out there. When I was trying to free her, the stupid gal took her foot out too early and knocked my hand against one of the damn teeth.”

“Is it bad?”

“Stings like a son-of-a-bitch, but it’s not worth crying about. I’m pissed at her more than anything else. When I first found her, a couple of weeks back, she was three miles south of the road, all alone. Looked like she hadn’t eaten in days, and she was all dirtied up from roaming out there. I figured she was just a lost stray since she wasn’t branded and didn’t have a tag, so I took her in, thinking it was the right thing to do. But here she goes now, trying to run off after everything I’ve done for her. She’s got a roof over her head, clean water, food in her belly—and this is how she thanks me.” Roy explained lifting his cut hand.

“A good whipping is in order. That’ll teach her some appreciation.”

Roy shook his head. “Nah. After what happened to her, I think she’s knows her place now. She won’t be getting out of this stall for a while.”

“No offense, ’cause I don’t know a thing about raising Mares, but if any of them caused harm to me or my own, intentional or not, there’d be hell to pay.” Marvin smacked the back of his hand into his other palm while looking directly into Lana’s eyes.

Her pupils grew larger with terror after each blow.

“Oh, no doubt I’d do the same if the occasion called for it, but sometimes they don’t know any better. Patience is required in this line of work. It’s a labor of love, really.”

“And that’s why you’re the best, Roy. You train ’em for us folk who don’t have the heart to deal with that kinda shit day in and day out. We’d all go crazy.”

“Don’t feel too bad for me. It’s you paying the price I’m asking.”

Roy’s reply caused them both to break out in laughter.

“You’re right about that! But it’s well worth it for my boy.”

“Speaking of, why don’t we see how he’s doing with Scarlett? If you still want her, we’ll load her into the trailer behind your truck. You can pay me after everything’s all set and done.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

They turned their backs on Lana, leaving her to think that perhaps Butterfly Grange wasn’t so bad compared to what might have happened if someone like Marvin had found her instead...

As the men made their way over to Scarlett’s stall, they expected to see Anthony standing with her, but the Mare was alone, with no young boy keeping her company.

“Anthony?” Marvin shouted.

There was no response.

Both men turned their heads in every direction, looking around to find the boy, hoping he was simply wandering about and observing the other Mares, but nothing.

Then the sound of Duke's barking rang through the stable. Roy caught sight of the dog, looking inside one of the stalls and howling to alert his master. Knowing which stall it was, Roy was glad Duke reacted as he did. He just hoped he wasn't too late.

Quickly he ran forward, with Marvin a few paces behind, eager to discover what had happened. Roy grabbed the bars of the stall and swung himself inside. To his horror, he found Anthony there, riding April.

"What the hell are you doing? Get off her, now!" Roy screamed. He moved with such haste that even Duke knew not to obstruct the path of his master.

At first Anthony didn't pay any attention to Roy or his command, but then he felt the man's hand grab his arm, pulling him off of April in one tug. Roy's grip was fierce, almost dislocating the boy's shoulder from of its socket. Had it not been for Marvin's words of disbelief and anger, Roy's outrage would have gotten the better of him and he might have injured the young boy. However, Marvin's rush forward prompted Roy to let go, and he waited for the father to discipline his son properly.

"Have you lost your goddamn mind, Anthony?" Marvin cried, grabbing the back of Anthony's shirt.

The two made their way out of the stall while Roy stayed behind to check on April.

Marvin grabbed Anthony's chin and forced him to look up. "Answer me! You have any idea what you've done?"

The boy's eyes welled with tears. His lips were quivering so violently that he couldn't speak, and Marvin knew this. He wanted to strike the boy, but as he saw Roy

slowly exit the stall and close the gate, he knew this wasn't the right time or place. He had to remedy the situation with Roy first. Jabbing Anthony with his finger, he whispered furiously, "I'm gonna fix this for you now, but you just wait till we get back home. Ya hear me?"

Anthony could only imagine what his father had waiting for him—and that was the point. Making his son wait in fear of the inevitable wrath that would come down upon him just added to the punishment.

"Man, I'm sorry, Roy. I don't know what to say. Did he hurt her?"

"She's okay, aside from the little breaking. Can't be undone now." Roy's voice was tight with irritation.

"Listen, let me make it up to you. I know ya had Scarlett all ready for us, but how about I take April off your hands at double the price? That sound fair?"

"No, no. If Anthony's going learn how to ride, it ought to be with Scarlett. I've been training her to handle a boy his age for a while now. Safer for him. I can still put April to good use."

"Ya sure?"

"Yeah, don't worry about it."

"Then let me at least pay double for Scarlett, to compensate ya for the trouble."

"Marvin, really—"

"I won't hear it, Roy. We're friends, but this is business. Besides, I'll be taking the money from Anthony's allowance until he pays me back in full for Scarlett. That'll teach him to respect another man's property and to learn the value of money at the same time."

Roy couldn't argue with Marvin, especially when Marvin was already holding out his hand to seal the deal. Unable to turn down such a good offer, Roy reached out, and with a single firm shake another sale was made.

They took Scarlett out of her stall and loaded her into the trailer attached to Marvin's truck. He paid Roy handsomely and made sure that Anthony apologized to him before heading off.

Roy waved good-bye, watching the truck shrink in the distance as it approached the horizon. Then he lowered his hand and looked at the envelope containing the payment for Scarlett. What should have been a momentous occasion—earning double his usual profit—he instead met with disdain. He had lost something more valuable than money because of Marvin and Anthony. The only reason he dealt with people like them at all was that, as Marvin had said, Butterfly Grange was a business. Yet, though Roy was a businessman, practicalities didn't mean much to him in the current moment.

He looked down at his one true friend beside him and said, "I'll tell you Duke, those damn Spades got no control of any kind. Over their kids or over themselves. None." He leaned forward and spit in the direction of Marvin's truck before walking toward the stable. One more thing needed to be done before he called it a day. He hadn't been lying to Marvin when he said that April could still be put to good use, and the time had come to do just that.

Roy could look past a lot of things that the Mares did to upset him. Sure, the new ones gave him a hassle on their arrival to Butterfly Grange—but it was nothing that some time and discipline couldn't handle. Yes, Lana had broken out and tried to stray off, but

she had suffered for that exploration and would certainly think twice before doing it again. There was one thing, however, that Roy had instilled in the Mares above all else: they must never let another person ride them without his permission.

This rule was most stringent for the Fillies, which weren't even for sale. It was necessary that Roy be the first to ride them—that initial experience was crucial to their training, a way for him to establish himself as the dominant figure in their lives and to prepare them for their buyers. Now that Anthony had ridden April at her young age, she had formed an attachment to him, one that should have belonged to Roy and that now he could never replace.

It was bad enough that she had taken a liking to the boy, when usually Fillies were scared of his guests. Maybe it was because Anthony had been closer to her in age than the customers she usually saw in the stables. Or maybe she had been intrigued by the color of his skin; in comparison with Anthony, Roy was as white as a ghost. Whatever the reason, April had been broken in by the young boy, and that was something Roy could not forgive. He would never look at her in the same way again, and to ensure that none of the other Mares dared to violate his trust as she had, he needed to make an example of her.

Upon entering the stable, Roy placed the cash-filled envelope on his desk and picked up the shotgun. He made his way to the first stall and violently opened the door, where Beth awaited inside, terrified.

“Let's go, get out here!” he screamed.

Roy grabbed her reins and forced her out from what she had thought was a safe place. Between Duke's barking and the gun in Roy's hand, she gave no resistance

whatsoever, although she was shaking with dread. Roy closed the stall gate behind her and placed her reins within the latch, locking it so that she couldn't run off. Then he went to every other stall in the stable and tied up the other Mares and Fillies in the same way—all except April. He saved her for last.

After leading her to the center of the stable for all to see, Roy tied April's reins around a large nail buried in the soil so that she couldn't flee. The nail had been there since the beginning—this was not the first time a betrayal had occurred at Butterfly Grange, though the owners always wanted each one to be the last.

Duke stayed beside Roy, snarling and barking at April, ready to lunge forward and rip her to pieces if given the order. But that wasn't going to be what happened. It was Roy who would carry out the sentence.

Taking several steps back, he lifted his shotgun and thumbed back the hammers before taking aim at April. Then, staring down the barrel, he watched her slowly turn to him, horror contorting her face and body. When his eyes caught hers, amid all the howling from Duke and the cries from the other Mares and Fillies, he was still able to hear the sounds coming from April's tiny mouth.

“Please, Daddy, no...” she pleaded, her sobs cutting in between each word.

For a moment, as he aimed the gun, Roy hesitated. His finger loosened on the trigger, and he asked himself if he could forgive her for being ridden by Anthony. Then—

**BLAM!**

The barrels let out a hellish thunder that silenced everything in the stable.

April's small body jerked back a foot or so before falling lifelessly to the ground.

Roy lowered his gun and walked up to her, ignoring the other Mares, who were screaming in despair at having lost one of their own.

He knelt down next to the Filly's head and moved the hair lying across her face to reveal two ice-blue eyes, staring through him into oblivion. As the pool of warm blood formed around his boots, Roy admired her thin, milky-white legs and soft, youthful skin, lamenting his sacrifice and what he could have had with April.

With the exception of Lana, Roy had impregnated all the other Mares old enough to conceive, which had provided him with a supply of Fillies that would eventually grow into more trainable Mares. He always rode them first, before they were sold off to customers. But he knew that eventually time would catch up to him and someone else would have to take over Butterfly Grange. Since it was a family-owned business, leaving it to an outsider was out of the question.

This was what had made April so special. She was the youngest Filly at Butterfly Grange, the most graceful, and the most worthy of training. One day, Roy had planned to have her serve as his wife and fulfill all his desires and needs. When she reached child-bearing age, he would then impregnate her until she bore him a son, whom he could teach to manage Butterfly Grange—the perfect successor to a long line of breeders.

It would have been a perfect solution, but now she lay dead at his feet. His plans and dreams had dissipated like the smoke that rose from her shredded wound.

Though he shed no tears, Roy couldn't help shaking his head. "What a damn waste..." he muttered.

Now that April was gone, Katherine was next in line to take on the responsibilities

of being his wife. She was only a few months older than April, and while she was not a blonde—Roy’s favorite type of Mare—as a redhead, she would do.