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The summer my Dad was killed, I turned sixteen and fell in love.

When school let out, I had no idea two of them things was gonna happen. Not losing Dad and finding love. But they did, and they changed me for life. Left a lotta dreams behind. But got hold of some new ones, too.

It sure hurt, Dad dying like that. Made me grow up faster'n I wanted to. But somebody had to take over being the man of the family, and me being the oldest, it was up to me. Soon as the funeral was over -- only right the West Virginia Coal Company paid for it, him being killed when the tunnel caved in. And they give Mom something "for compensation." A pay-off we all thought, but what was she gonna do? Sue 'em? What with? How'd she pay a lawyer? So she took the money, and I went to work once we got through the funeral.

Used Dad's old truck to get around. Bagging groceries down at the Busy Bee, washing cars at the Pay-Lo Gas Station. But them two jobs together didn't pay enough. Mom had five children to feed, and that pay-off wasn't gonna last for long. I needed me a real job, but I didn't see how I was gonna find one, cause I was just too young. Didn't even have a high school diploma, so who was gonna hire me?

Then I heard about this widow come to live outside Lewiston on the old road to Morristown, the one nobody takes nomore, cause it's too curvy. Rather use the Interstate. Gets 'em there faster and safer. Anyway, I heard from the manager of the Pay-Lo that she was looking for somebody to help fix up this old cabin she'd bought. Dad was handier with tools than I'll ever be, but he taught us boys everything he could, and I figured I could hammer and saw with the best of 'em. So I drove out there one day, between bagging at the Busy Bee and washing cars, hoping she'd see the advantage of hiring someone cheap cause they was young and eager.

I knew where that cabin was. Musta stood there two hunnerd years at least, always in the Thomasson family. Then Floyd Thomasson took it into his head to go work in some Cleveland plant, and the whole place fell to ruin. I turned onto the dirt track that led down into the hollow where they built their cabin, and the first thing I saw was the roof caved in. Not all of it, but bad enough that it was gonna take some work to keep the rain out. The walls looked okay though, thick, made of logs from trees so big you don't see 'em like that no more. Them logs needed chinking, but I knew how to do that.

Parked the truck in front of the sagging porch and couldn't see a window that wasn't busted out. Called out "Howdy" a bunch of times, but didn't seem to be a soul about. Knocked on the door and peeked in one of them busted windows, but wasn't nobody to home.

Inside, I could see where the rain'd come through the caved-in roof and made a mess. Them wide-planked, hand-hewn floorboards was covered in wet leaves, and the smell of rot and mildew was everywhere.

Sure was gonna be a lotta work, getting that old place back in shape. And that was a good thing for me, if not for the new owner.

Looked around outside some, and all I could see was destruction, from the tumble-down stone walls that marked the property line to the overgrown vegetable garden them Thomasson women musta tended for generations. The chimney looked pretty good, though, the mortar just needing a little patching here and there among the field stones. Still, it was a gloomy place, set under giant trees that cast deep shadows even though the sun was full out. The smell of rotten wood was everywhere, what with some of them old trees falling down and being left to lie in the moldy leaves. Hard to imagine why a widow'd want to live alone in a place like that.

Started back to the truck and took a fall cause of a hole some critter'd dug. Fox, maybe. They do that if they smell something underground. Rolled over, looked in that hole and let out a little gasp. There was bones down there, lying every which way. Fox musta done that. Stirred 'em up myself, trying to figure out what was buried there. Didn't want to think it was one of them Thomassons, even though people did bury their dead on the farm back in the old days. Finally decided maybe some Thomasson had buried a dog. Least the bones wasn't human, cause the hip bone was all wrong. Kinda give me the shivers, though, and I set off for the truck at a trot.

Found a scrap of paper lying on the dashboard and wrote on it to say I'd be glad to help. Signed my name and phone number, and tucked it in the cabin doorjam. Then drove back to the Pay-Lo just in time to put on my coveralls and get to work.

Well, the widow called me that night and suggested we meet at the Quik Treet the next day. That's this drive-in, been here long before them fast food chains arrived, and I hope it'll be here long after they're gone. Food's a lot better, and you know you're dealing with somebody local. They got a few tables inside, and that's where she said we'd meet.

I set down facing the door, and it wasn't long before this woman come in who didn't look like nobody from around Lewiston, and that's for sure. Looked like she'd lived in the city for a long time and was trying to fit in but didn't have the hang of it yet. Jeans too new and big bucks. Same for her shoes and handbag. Looked like money'd come to her easy, and she knew how to spend it. Even her hairdo was wrong. High-style, like something you see on TV.

Well, she come right over and introduced herself, so she musta figured out who I was, too. Anyway, I stood up and shook her hand.

She sure smelled nice. Not that drug store perfume some of the girls at Lewiston High wear. Hers was differnt. Sweet and spicy, like them flowers we planted by our church door. Pinks, is that what they're called? Anyway, she smelled just like she looked. Expensive and not from here.

"Hi there," she said. "You must be Jimmy Lee. I'm Sarah Simmons." Deep down, under the education that was plainly there, you could hear just the faintest memory of West Virginia in her voice. Where'd she come from? And what was she doing back here?

Miz Simmons looked me up and down, like she was measuring me for a suit I could never buy. I sure felt awkward, but I held my ground and tried to look her in the eye.

"How old are you?" she said, and I had to tell her my age. Would've liked to ask hers, but I knew enough to keep my mouth shut. Gussed she was forty or so.

It give me a worry that now she knew I was just a high school kid, but I wasn't gonna give up.

"I may be young," I said, "But I'm big and strong. And I know how to fix most things round a house. I ain't afraid of work, and I really need this job." My eyes got all blurry then, and she musta noticed, cause she suggested we get something to eat before we talked any more.

We went up to the counter, and she said she should pay cause I was doing her a favor to meet her there. Made me feel a little ashamed she wouldn't let me pay my own way, but I tried to be as thoughtful of her feelings as she was of mine. We carried our little red plastic baskets of burgers, Cokes and fries back to the same table and set down.

She dipped a couple fries into the little paper tub of ketchup they come with, chewed 'em good and said, "So tell me why you need this job."

And the way she said it, like she really wanted to know, not just for herself but for me, that warm way of asking made me open up. I didn't feel pitiful no more, and I laid it all out for her. Dad dying in the mine. Mom not having enough to take care of everybody. Me being the man in the family now, and working two jobs wasn't enough.

She didn't lay a wet blanket of sympathy on me. Didn't reach out a hand and stroke my arm with more comfort than I could bear. "Okay," she said. "Let's give it a try. You come out to the cabin everyday for a month. I'll pay you the same thing I'd pay a carpenter, and we'll see how it goes. If we find out we suit each other, we'll carry on. If it's not working for either of us, we can walk away, no harm done. How's that sound?"

It sounded so good I couldn't believe it. But I tried to be a man and said a month's trial seemed just the thing for both of us. Said it righteous, just like she did.

Now, looking back, it seems so easy, how I got on a road that led to misery and murder. Deepest misery of my life. Worse'n when Dad died. You learn to accept that miners can die any day they work a shift. You know they live with danger, and you half-expect them dying anyway. It takes time, but you can get over it.

But when loved ones are taken from you without no rhyme or reason, that kills you too. That was a misery so bad, I nearly lost my mind.