

1st Place Winner – Cassandra Den Hartog – No Regrets

The funeral director handed Abraham a pen and a glass of water. “What would you like written on your wife’s headstone?”

Abraham paused, pen in hand.

It all started thirty years ago when he was twenty-one.

The gardens of lilies and phlox along the driveway of the old farm house had an unusual number of weeds in it. He hadn’t seen old lady Fortner in a few days. As he bounced by in the buggy he noticed the front screen door open, banging against the grey siding in the breeze. She had said her family was supposed to have an early Thanksgiving dinner this year. He guided the old mare into the drive and walked the gravel path up to her front steps. The first step remained broken as it had been for his entire childhood. She visited him often, especially after his parents died and he inherited the neighboring farm.

He knocked. “Mrs. Fortner?”

After no response he pushed the front door open. The hinge gave a pained, unnatural creak. He’d never forget that sound. Mrs. Fortner had two kitchens in her home. He found her in the newest one on the wood floor. Dead. Thanksgiving fixings laying around her.

One week later he wishes the English lady who’d watched him grow up, goodbye.

Not long after, she came. The day was hot. The old chestnut mare was having trouble pulling the buggy. The crunch sound of her hooves and the metal wheels on the gravel almost lulled him to sleep until the unusual chorus of laughter jolted him. A woman stood under the shade of the large maple out front. A small boy tugged on her denim skirt. A girl, a little older, followed a man in uniform up the broken step into the old farm house. The woman smiled and waved at him as he passed. Her hair, gold as a sunflower. Frame petite, almost childlike. He watched them settle in as he tended his farm each day, alone.

Every Sunday and market day she waved as he trotted by. She, always in her skirt and cheerful blouse, worked with her son on the yard every day. Every morning when the school bus went by, her daughter would wave at him from the back window.

Three months later a knock came at his door. Abraham put his glass of sun tea down. Half expecting another person wanting fresh eggs he pulled the front door open. The mouthwatering smell of hot blueberry sweetness wafted up to him from the woman next door. Her large blue eyes were red as if she were sick or crying. A handkerchief hung from her denim pocket.

She introduced herself as Lorain Fortner. Basket of fresh blueberry muffins in her hands. “I’m sorry to bother you, but...” She cleared her throat. “My husband’s horse is out and-”

Her whole face contorted. She shoved the basket of muffins at him. He caught it just in time for her to grab her handkerchief and sneeze twice.

A dog barked behind her. The boy and a fluffy brown puppy stood further down the walk.

“I can’t get him back in and came to ask for help.”

“Where’s your husband?”

She looked down. “Deployed last week to Iraq. I have no family here and-” She sneezed again.

The boy came up and took her skirt. “Mamma sick.”

“Hush, Joe.” She looked up and forced a smile. “I have allergies and asthma. It’s a rough time of year.”

She explained that her homemade muffins were trade for his help. He caved to the delicious smell.

She returned a few days later with two handkerchiefs, an inhaler, and a plate of chocolate chip cookies.

“My mower-” Achoo! “Is... broke....”

Again he caved. Every week progressing to every day. When late fall hit, a little knock came at his door.

The same girl that always waved from the bus met him with bright red eyes. “Mommy can’t breathe.”

His chest seized up.

“Did you call an ambulance?”

She shook her head. “She told us not to. Joe stayed with her. We didn’t know-”

“That’s all right.” He patted her on the shoulder. “Let’s go.”

They ran all the way to her house in the dark. The girl’s pink flashlight leading the way. Light from the kitchen windows spilled out on the dark deck. He jumped the still broken step and followed the girl to the front door. Again the hinges cried out to him. A shrill gasp came from the kitchen.

Lorain sat on the floor leaning against the cupboard. Her eyes moved to his and then lulled to the side. He dropped to his knees and put his hand on her shoulder. “Lorain. Can you hear me?”

She gasped for air, the sound like an animal being choked to death. His heart raced hard enough to drive a sweat onto his brow. “Call an ambulance.”

The girl looked from Lorain to him and nodded quickly.

“Breathe. You have to breathe,” he coached.

When her gasps grew short and ragged he took her in his arms, tilting her head back to open her airway. Old Lady Fortner had told him that, one afternoon when reflecting on her nursing days. Minutes drove on like hours until blue lights flashed in the windows.

He stood with her children in the front lawn as the ambulance took her away.

Joe, now crying, took ahold of Abraham's pants.

"Do you have any family around here?" he asked.

They both shook their heads.

"What about friends? Does anyone watch after you?"

"Suzie watches over me," said Joe.

"Hush. That's not what he means Joe," said Suzie "Mom watches us mostly. Granma and Grandpa both passed away. We have an aunt in California."

"I want to see mommy," said Joe. "Will mommy be alright?"

"I'm sure she'll be fine." He smiled and patted the boy on the head. Despite his words his heart still raced.

The night drew on and the children grew more restless. Joe cried several times, comforted only by Suzie. Abraham sat silently at the dining table that, ironically, was one his father made for Old Lady Fortner before his parents passed in the car and buggy crash. Times like this he almost wished he had a car himself.

"Hmm. Are you two up for an adventure?"

The pair lifted their heads to him. He gave them both a grin.

"Where?" asked Suzie.

"To see your mother."

She sprang up and clasped her hands together. "You can do that? But... I thought mommy said it's against the rules for you to drive."

He smiled. "That's right. But we can ride in my buggy."

"With your big horsey?" asked Joe, his eyes wide.

A true smile broke across his face. “Yes. With my horse.” Luckily, since he had to take care of the farm all by himself he had installed headlights to his buggy for late night work. He could keep them until next year when he turned twenty-two. Then he would have to decide.

He took the kids the five-mile buggy trip to the hospital. Lorain’s shocked and happy tears when they all entered her room warmed him like nothing else had before. Bad asthma attack, is what she said with a smile as she thanked him over and over. Even days later she returned with a fresh pie and thanked him again.

“This is quite inappropriate,” an Elder told him.

“You should not spend so much time with a married English woman,” said another.

But, the cookies and pies kept coming with her desperate pleas for help.

“I know I don’t do well out here. But I don’t want to lose my husband’s family farm.”

In the dim light of the funeral home Abraham looked down at his round belly. A teardrop fell to his white button up shirt as her remembered.

After months of visits and warnings from the Elders Lorain suddenly didn’t show up. No children. No ambulance. A cold pre-winter chill to the air. A fresh layer of snow covered the deck, unmarred by even paw prints. His mare whinnied from the drive way in the deadening silence.

“Lorain?” No one answered his knock. The front door let out the old haunting creek he’d heard a year ago. Chills snapped down his back. *No*, he thought. *Please not again.*

He found her, crumpled on the kitchen floor clutching a note. Inhaler, tissues, and a plate of cookies scattered beside her. The quick wave of relief he felt finding her alive whisked away like smoke in the wind.

“He- He’s-” She didn’t have to say anymore.

He should have had more control, but he couldn’t take the pain in her eyes.

“It’ll be all right.” He rested his hand on her shoulder.

She folded before him, smothering her face onto his shoulder. Deep sobs made her body heave up and down. Each breath grew more labored until she ripped away and reached for her inhaler, which he already had in his hand. He stayed with her all night. Deep in his heart he could not abandon her.

Again he returned to the funeral home, standing in the back. But as Mr. Fortner’s casket was carried out Joe ran for him. He took his pant leg and cried. Lorain buried her husband in the cemetery near their homes. Despite the time it took to ride back he still found her out by the new grave. He let her mourn, and instead picked up the children and took them home.

She didn't have to ask for his help after that. He just came.

"You must stop spending so much time with the English woman," repeated the Elders. "It's inappropriate. You must cease your actions immediately."

But, help they neighbor. Do unto others. In his heart he could not abandon her. Not now. A few more months and pant sizes later, spring set in. Flowers all in bloom. She would smell them even if it made her sneeze. She tended each garden with the same love as old Mrs. Fortner did. No, more. She loved the flowers, the colors, even the smells although the pollen made her sick.

The warm sun glinted off her hair. Today she wore a bright yellow blouse over her skirt. She bounced garden to garden discovering the newly blooming flowers he'd known all his life.

He picked a few pink crocus and snuck up behind her. "Surprise."

She turned and her eyes lit up like stars that sparkled with delight. "I love them." She scooped them up and cradled all but one that she tucked into her hair.

"You know..." she whispered.

"What?"

"The kids are very fond of you. You've really helped them cope."

"They're strong kids."

A soft blush covered her cheeks. "They asked me the other day if you were going to come live with us."

He froze in place. Not that the idea didn't cross his mind. *But my commitment to the church*, he thought. He only had two more months before getting baptized into the church. At least, he had planned on that before he met her.

"What did you say to that?"

Her blush deepened and moved down her neck. She let a small giggle and hid her face. "Children will be children."

"Is that what you want, too?"

She jolted. "Well..."

He took her hands in his. "I need to know. Would you like me to live with you?"

"Well... Yes."

At that moment his heart exploded. All deep hidden emotion sprung fourth.

“But I know it’s against your religion,” she said quickly.

It was. But the church had forbid them being together. He’d already felt the consequences, but could not stop. He’d worried that as soon as he joined the church he would never be allowed to see her again. But there had to be some way to make this work.

“What if I said I can make that happen?”

Her eyes lit up. “That would be wonderful.” She threw her arms around him. Their first embrace. He felt more than her body. Her felt her very emotion. He couldn’t leave her.

He approached the Elders with his request.

“Absolutely not.”

“We warned you to break off this engagement. By staying with her you go against the church. Against the customs your family has followed for generations.”

“Is there any way at all?” he asked.

“No. You must break this off immediately. After which you may join the church.”

“Is that your final word?” he whispered.

“Yes!”

“Very well.” He lowered his head.

“Then you will break this off?”

“Yes I will.” Resolve swelled within him. He’d feared this decision for months, but now knew what he had to do. Now he didn’t fear the choice. He looked each elder in the eye. “I’m leaving the order.”

A gasp filled the room.

“And I suppose I will learn the ways of an English wedding,” he finished.

It was all worth it when he told her the news. To see her face light up in smile that seemed to never leave. He admitted he knew little of an English wedding, but wanted to be with her and the kids as much as possible.

That night under the moonlight he noticed her eyes, sad and looking out at the farm. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, it’s just the family tradition says the farm should always belong to a Fortner. I just feel bad for breaking it. I hate to leave this place.”

“Why would you?”

“Well I can’t ask you to give up your family farm. And I surely can’t ask you to take the Fortner name. It’s not even my family’s name.”

He shook his head and smiled. “I left the church. My brother will take the farm back. And why shouldn’t I take your name.” Despite all his family it was Old Lady Fortner that saw him the most.

He was happy now. No regrets. This place felt like home.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you too, my sweet Lorain.”

And the years passed by, happily filled with sweets, hard work, and two more children.

Until two days ago.

The dreaded creek in the front door suddenly returned. Cold chills shot down his back. His chest tightened with such dread that when he found her on the kitchen floor he broke. Screamed. His favorite chocolate chip cookies littered the floor. His youngest son, their son, came running.

Abraham’s hand shook as he remembered. Tears dotted the paper. The funeral director waited patiently. All he could write; all he could muster was;

Sweet Lorain. No regrets, forever.