

# Buttercup

## Andrew

**T**he storm shattered the peaceful dark of a sleepy night, and an ear-splitting *bang* jarred Andrew from his rest.

Thunder rocked the Michigan night as lightning cut across the sky. Andrew blinked in the darkness. The face of his bedside clock was blank. He sat up and winced at a sharp pain in his aging back.

*A thunderstorm in March*, he wondered. His mind must be playing tricks on him.

Then he heard it again, a raucous thrashing in the barn. He immediately knew what was happening.

Beside him, the figure of his wife stirred. "What is it?" she murmured.

"Buttercup," he said.

The banging sound continued, punching through the rumble of the storm.

Andrew sighed. Whenever the weather was bad, that poor cow went berserk.

Andrew slid out of bed and reached for the flashlight he kept on the dresser. His hand brushed against it and sent it clattering to the floor.

A curse word rose to his lips, but he bit it back. Alice was against cursing of any kind and would not tolerate it in her house. He would bear her wrath if she heard him! That was the last thing he needed right now.

He bent over with a groan, massaging the throbbing spot on his back, and grabbed the flashlight. Andrew wiggled into his trousers in the dark and made his way toward the kitchen, gently shutting the bedroom door behind him.

With a whistle, he called for Schatzi, his loyal Australian Shepherd, and the fluffy creature came bouncing up from her customary berth in front of the fireplace in the cavernous farmhouse kitchen. Andrew pulled on his jacket and

high barn boots and headed out, the weak cone of his flashlight cutting into the dark.

Icy rain lashed his face. Andrew winced but pushed through the blinding torrent.

The banging in the barn continued, even louder than before.

"I'm coming, Buttercup!" he hollered.

The cow was a smart one. She'd probably managed to find the one loose cobble in the barn and kick it into the galvanized steel at the base of the wall. Andrew heard the agitated animal before he saw her. Buttercup was mooing and bucking up in her stall. Soon she'd have the whole herd carrying on and making a commotion.

Andrew slogged his way to the barn, the dirt path a muddy quagmire. Lightning streaked and Schatzi barked.

"Come on," he said, urging the dog toward the barn.

He reached the door and wiggled the latch. He was already soaked through from the rain and shivering. Water dripped into his eyes, making it nearly impossible to see. He wrenched at the door and pulled it open.

"I'm here, I'm here!" he called to the frustrated animal.

He took a step into the barn. The floor had melted to a slick of mud, and his boot slid like a skate on ice. He yelled and shouted one of those curse words Alice would hate to hear, then fell to the ground flat on his back.

He gasped. The wind was gone from his lungs.

Lightning flickered through the walls and a boom of thunder startled every animal in the barn. Buttercup mooed in fear, kicking against the walls.

Andrew couldn't move. He wheezed, trying to draw air into his lungs. A hot, pulsing pain was burning in his chest. He grasped at his coat and tried to unzip it.

But the corners of his vision darkened and his ears started to hiss as if he was underwater, and the sounds of his cattle and the storm all faded into silence.

## Alice

Alice opened her eyes. Something was banging on a wall or door.

She reached across the mattress, feeling for her husband. There was no one there.

“Andrew?” she said.

A cascade of thunder rattled the dishes in their cupboards. Alice sat up and rubbed her eyes.

“Andrew?”

No answer.

The banging continued, the sound of something pushing or kicking against wooden planks.

Alice sighed. “It’s okay, Buttercup,” she whispered.

That blessed cow must be miserable out there.

Pulling her nightgown tight against her body, Alice stood and peered out the window toward the door of the barn. A small pool of yellow light shone through the slashing rain. She couldn’t see her husband. He was probably inside trying to calm the poor beast down.

There was no use trying to go back to sleep. Not until Andrew was back and the animals were calm. Yawning, Alice made her way to the kitchen. The power was out, but she opened the refrigerator and quickly retrieved a bottle of milk. She poured herself a cup and sat at the table, sipping the soothing drink. She could at least enjoy the fruits of the farm while her husband took care of things outside.

She took a long gulp and smiled. Buttercup used to be such a great milker. The kids loved her and spoiled her, even as adults. She was originally a 4-H project for their daughter, Greta. She’d acquired Buttercup to raise, show at fair, and then sell for college money.

But things didn’t go how anyone planned. Greta fell in love with that cow, coddled her, and treated her like a puppy. Buttercup followed commands even better than Schatzi. When the time came to show Buttercup at the Isabella County fair, Greta couldn’t bring herself to part with her. She pouted. She cried. She stopped speaking to everyone in the house. She even quit eating.

This behavior was so unlike Greta. Andrew and Alice's oldest child was the stubborn, resilient kid who took things in stride. She was the one holding her younger brothers' hands when the farm lost an animal.

So when Alice noticed her daughter's clothes hanging like an empty grain sack on her already spare frame, she informed Andrew that they were keeping the cow.

That was several years ago. Buttercup was now well past her prime, likely at the end of her life span. But she was family now.

Alice finished the glass of milk and yawned.

Where was Andrew?

Another calamitous crash sounded outside. Buttercup was *still* agitated.

Frowning, Alice rose and retrieved her raincoat from the closet. Andrew had handled situations like this hundreds of times.

But he was getting older. Both of them were. He needed more help than he liked to admit and maybe this was another one of those times.

Alice tucked the hood of her coat over her head and tugged the cinch tight. With a deep breath, she opened the door and stepped out into the tempest.

Rain immediately sprayed into her eyes, but she shielded her gaze with one hand and pushed through the darkness toward the open barn door.

"Andrew?" she called.

A growl of thunder shook the ground. Buttercup mooed in fear and kicked at the walls of the barn again.

Alice splashed through a pool of chill rainwater, reached the door, and looked inside.

## Andrew

He opened his eyes but saw nothing. Everything was dark and his ears were roaring like the ocean.

Yet he could still hear Buttercup, wailing in the midst of the dreadful storm.

Andrew tried to sit up but a stabbing sensation shot through his chest. Groaning, he lay back and rubbed the throbbing spot with his hand.

He blinked. Dim, yellow light began to appear.

"Calm... calm down... Buttercup..., " he managed to moan.

The hissing sound lessened until the sounds of the rain-battered barn sharpened.

What had happened?

He'd slipped and fallen. But why had he blacked out? And why this awful pain in the chest?

He massaged it and rolled onto his side, grunting. The pain remained and he wheezed for breath.

"I'm... coming...."

The cow continued to protest its stressful situation, kicking against the wall and bellowing.

Andrew rubbed his mud-streaked face and blinked again. There was mud, smooth stone, the flicker of his lantern....

He could see!

Andrew pushed himself to a seated position and felt his lungs struggling with the effort. The stabbing pierced at his heart again and he let out a low groan.

"Hold on... Buttercup...."

He could see and hear again. That was encouraging.

But his chest was pounding, each beat like a knife jabbing him between the ribs. He panted like a sprinter and leaned over on one arm.

Could he even stand back up?

Andrew grit his teeth and pushed. The shooting in his chest burned white hot, a kiln of pain.

He eased back down and tried to catch his breath.

What was happening to him? He'd been falling over for decades now. Kicked by cows, bumped by horses. Stepping on a misshapen stone and tumbling to the ground. He'd always been able to get up, bad back be damned.

Now it wasn't his back. Oh, that hurt too. In fact, he managed a weak smile when he twisted and found that those muscles were still barking at him.

But whatever was happening in his chest had nailed him to the floor.

Andrew sighed, still rubbing the terrible soreness in his chest. What the heck. He might as well rest a moment.

So he lay back down and let his head drop into a cake of cold mud.

And that was how he was when the barn door opened behind him and the horrified face of his dear wife, Alice, appeared.

## Alice

“Andrew!” she cried, rushing to his side.

“Don’t fuss, now,” he grumbled.

“You fell!” she exclaimed. “You fell and broke something!”

“No—” he started to say.

“I knew it! I knew this was becoming too much for you!”

“Hold on a minute, Alice—”

She knelt and clasped her hands. “Oh Jesus, please don’t let this be how it ends!”

“Alice, dearest!” he said, reaching over and grabbing the praying hands. “I’m okay. I just fell.”

“Well why are you laying here in the mud?” she said.

Her husband’s attempt at a comforting smile faded.

“I... I can’t get back up.”

She felt her heart leap into her throat. “Why not?”

He grimaced and lifted a hand to his chest. “Something hurts. It hurts bad.”

Her eyes must have been wide as platters because he began waving as if to brush all this away.

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” he said. “I just had a spell, that’s all.”

She snorted. “A spell? Andrew Jenette, you’ve never had a spell like this before.”

“Fine,” he said. “But can you settle Buttercup for me? The poor cow is raising Cain over there.”

Alice glanced over her shoulder to the stall where poor Buttercup was still bawling. “Are you sure?”

He nodded. “One hundred percent.”

She didn’t leave his side right away, though, and studied him for a few more seconds just to be sure.

But she obliged, and hurried over to Buttercup’s stall.

“There now, old girl,” she said. “It’s okay. You’ll be all right. Steady girl. Steady Buttercup.”

She stroked the animal’s head and scratched her poll. Buttercup lowed pitifully for a little longer, perhaps to express how frustrated it had been to have her master in the barn but doing nothing to comfort her.

Eventually, Buttercup settled herself, and as she calmed so did the other cows in the barn.

Alice continued the therapy for another minute, turning to watch her husband. He'd pushed himself up to a seated position, grunting loudly with effort. That wasn't like him, she thought with a rising sense of hot dread.

"You need me?" she called.

He shook his head.

Unsure if she was doing the right thing, Alice continued scratching Buttercup until not only her, but all the cows in the barn, were quiet and at peace despite the ongoing rumbling of the storm.

Alice brushed off her hands and returned to Andrew who was still sitting on the muddy floor.

"You need help?" she said.

He nodded. "Yes."

Cupping her hand under his armpit, she counted, "One—two—three," and hoisted him up. The man reached his feet but immediately wobbled on them, dizzy as if drunk. She kept her hands around his waist and held him fast.

"I'm good," he said after a moment of unsteadiness. "Honestly."

Alice stepped before him, her hands still securely on his torso. "No, Andrew Jenette. You're not."

He sighed and looked to the side, as if the light of her eyes was a truth serum.

"Tell me the truth," she said. "What happened?"

Andrew bowed his head. "Help me back to the house and I'll tell you."

Alice continued studying her husband. His brow was streaked with wrinkles, years of worry and concentration. The eyes deep, dark, burrowed in as if to keep what was seen close to the brain. As he stood up, still swaying as if to an old spiritual tune, his body seemed slightly crooked—not noticeable at first, but clearer the longer one took the time to pay attention.

Her husband was breaking apart, and this farm—their beloved Fair Haven—was the cause.

She didn't want to think of it that way. Someone else would have to say it.

But this life was destroying the man she loved.

"Okay," she said. "Let's take our time, though. We'll get you cleaned up, and then I want to hear every detail."

Andrew nodded. "Every detail."

## Andrew

He did exactly what his wife wanted: He told her everything. About his back. The slip in the barn. Passing out.

The searing blade in his chest.

And just as he feared, she picked up the phone and called 9-1-1.

It was the last thing he wanted. If anyone else had asked him, literally anyone, he would have fibbed. Not lied. Just fashioned a different version of things.

But Alice had given him a look. It was a look that only appeared when things were truly dire.

In the past it had been a look reserved for other people's problems. Her own when she had to endure her mother's Alzheimer's. The kids when each encountered their own problems with school, boyfriends and girlfriends, or injuries. He even saw that look when they talked about the budget and whether or not the farm could break even.

But this time it was different. This time the look was for *him*.

That got his attention. He listened as Alice spoke with the responder. Then there was a silence—perhaps she was being transferred—then, sure enough, she began speaking more specifically about his symptoms.

Andrew knew his bride wasn't one to panic. He appreciated that about her. You couldn't survive long on a farm with a partner who was prone to worrying. There was always something to potentially "worry" about. A sick animal. A complication with calving. Broken equipment. But Alice was a rock, steady in the storm.

Yet the tone of her voice was different this time.

He smiled as he sipped a glass of milk. *Of course it was*. Alice may have been hardened against misfortune around the farm, but this was their first real health scare with *him*.

And without him, the farm was nothing.

"I love you, Alice," he said.

She couldn't hear him. She was absorbed in the conversation with someone who was probably decoding his symptoms.

But it was worth saying nonetheless.



## Alice

The lamps glowed softly while the refrigerator hummed. Power had returned and the EMTs were gone.

Andrew sat at the kitchen table, his head hanging with exhaustion. Alice watched him, a worried frown still on her face as she measured out coffee into the percolator.

“Say it again,” he said.

“Cardiac arrhythmia,” Alice answered. “At least, that’s their best estimate.”

“Uh, huh.”

“But you’re going in tomorrow,” she said. “I’ve already booked your appointment. Eight-thirty, but we’re going to be there fifteen minutes early.”

Andrew glanced at her, flashed a weak smile, then looked down again.

He could sulk all he wanted. She wasn’t about to lose her husband, the man who had made this farm their home for three-and-a-half decades.

The sound of sizzling drew her eyes to the stovetop where she was making Andrew’s favorite breakfast: Pancakes with extra blueberries with their own Jenette Farm maple syrup, sage breakfast sausage, strong coffee and orange juice.

“After you eat,” she said, flipping a flapjack with expert skill, “you’re going to rest. Robbie’s here and he said he’ll be fine on his own.”

“No,” Andrew said, “Robbie needs me.”

“You’re not going out there,” Alice said, casting him a stern glance. “Not today.”

“I’ll take it easy. I promise.”

“No,” she said.

She carried the skillet over to the table and effortlessly flipped the pancakes onto Andrew’s plate.

“Eat,” she said, “and take your time.”

After thirty-five years of marriage they had breakfast timing down to a science. Alice always served Andrew straight from the skillet.

“Okay, then,” Andrew said. He looked up at his bride and shot her a quick wink. “How about a big mug of hot coffee instead?”

Andrew raised his oversized cup and Alice deftly filled it. Then she topped it off with a bulb of fresh farm cream.

Andrew cut off a corner of a pancake and forked it into his mouth. "Mm," he said, nodding. "You know how to make 'em."

"Thank you, dear," she said.

Alice slid into the chair opposite him and sipped from her own mug, letting the hot coffee ease her spirit. She looked up at her husband and saw he was already smiling across the table at her.

Then, in beautiful unison, they both said, "We need to talk."

Andrew laughed. "You go first."

Alice took a deep breath. "I'm worried about you, Andrew. This around-the-clock routine is meant for the younger generation. You are working way too hard and not getting enough rest. And now this thing with your heart?" She shook her head with a sigh. "I think it is time we made some changes."

Andrew was silent. He took another bite and chewed it slowly. "I didn't think it was getting this bad. I know I'm older, but I feel like I can handle it."

"There's no shame in earning your rest, Andrew," Alice said. "Besides, you weren't any good at hiding this anyway. We've been married way too long for that, Mr. Jenette."

He chewed his pancake with a satisfied smile. "Fair enough."

"Look," Alice said, putting her palms on the table. "It may sound extreme. But I can't help but wonder if it's time we sold the farm and moved into a smaller home."

Andrew stopped chewing and stared at her, his eyes heavy. "You mean... retiring?"

Alice nodded. "After this morning, yes."

"That's pretty drastic, don't you think?" Andrew said.

"No, I don't think it is drastic. You have been hanging on by a thread the last several years. Keeping this farm afloat is going to kill you. We simply cannot compete with big agribusiness and I'm not going to watch you work yourself into the grave for a losing proposition."

Andrew set his fork on his plate. "This farm has been in my family for five generations. I can't let it go."

"I understand that."

"And what would we do?" Andrew continued. "Who would even buy it? I couldn't bear to see it swallowed up by a big interest. Half those farms aren't even run by Americans; they're foreign-owned. Mitt next door is struggling, too. If he sells, and then we sell too, it won't be long before a concentrated animal

feeding operation swallows both of us up. You know how I feel about that. I can't do that to my dad's—my *granddad's*—farm."

Alice shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe we can sell it to a developer. Divide it up into lots and sell each as residential properties. Not every buyer is going to necessarily destroy what your family built, Andrew."

He was shaking his head. "I don't like it, Alice."

"I don't like it either! And it may have been different if just one of our kids had wanted to stay and keep the farm going. But they didn't. Heck, we encouraged them to leave. We didn't want this for them. Endless hours of back-breaking work that leave you flat on your back, fighting off a heart attack."

"It's more than that, Alice—"

"Never a vacation, either," she went on. "And for what? To barely make ends meet and live with never-ending uncertainty."

Andrew massaged the bridge of his nose. "Alice, please," he said, "I can't do this right now."

"You *have* to do this," Alice said, her voice rising. "Think about what we might miss out on. Greta is engaged, which means weddings. Grandbabies. Do you want to be able to play with those grandchildren? Do you want to be able to enjoy what's ahead of you? Or is everything about protecting the past?"

Andrew wearily rubbed his face with his hands. "I get it," he said. "But it's not that simple."

"Yes, it is," his wife said. "Let's face it: We are at the end of the line, and it's time to make a choice."

"I—I have to think about this," Andrew said. "I know we're barely hanging on. I know it's getting harder, year after year. And yes, Alice," he said, looking his wife directly in the eye, "*I am* exhausted. You're not wrong, my dear. I just—I just need a minute to think."

"Of course," Alice said. "I'm not saying we make a rash decision. But we need to choose *something*, because right now the way things are is killing you."

Andrew nodded. He drew a long breath through his nose and let it out like steam whistling from a teapot.

"Let's talk to the kids," he said. "They grew up here. Fair Haven is a part of them and they are part of it, too."

Alice nodded. "Absolutely."

"And heck," Andrew added with a meager grin, "our kids are pretty smart. They'll probably have a few good ideas."

"Yes, they will."

Andrew pushed back from the table and slowly rose from the chair.

“Back to bed for me?” he said.

Alice nodded. “Yes. Rest. Give your heart a break, if only for a day.”

With that, she helped her weary husband up the stairs to their room and tucked him into the sheets. With him secure, she returned to the kitchen and picked up the phone.

It was time to tell the kids what had happened.

## Alice

Andrew was asleep. His snores rumbled through the house like the purrs of a jungle cat.

Alice stood at the sink, washing dishes and gazing out the window at the rain-soaked farm. The torrent had passed but the land lay bleak and drenched under a morosely gray sky.

She finished the last plate and set it in the rack to dry. Wiping her hands, Alice turned and studied the large, silent living space. Their home for decades. Where their babies had learned to walk. Countless pets making a space to nap in the sunlight pouring through the windows.

Their whole lives had happened here.

As she stood there, drinking it all in, Alice felt her eyes burn. It was okay to cry. This wasn't going to be easy. But she hastily wiped her cheeks.

The farmstead stood just off Costabella Road on the county line between Mecosta and Isabella counties in central Michigan. The stones that formed the frame of the house had been dug from the land and stacked one-by-one by Andrew's great-great grandfather, Jacques Jenette. Over the years there had been judicious additions in keeping with the architectural integrity of the original farmhouse.

Generations had called this building home. Families giving birth to children, those children growing up and marrying, then raising their own kids.

So many memories! So many gatherings and celebrations!

Alice felt dizzy a moment as she tried to reckon with it all. She leaned against the counter, visualizing a whirlwind of Christmases past. There was the year that Santa brought farm sets for both boys, Philip and Louis. Of course, Greta

had been furious because she got a doll house but wanted a farm set just like the boys. You never could figure that girl out.

There was the year that the family had their first and only artificial tree. It was so symmetrical and beautiful with evenly spaced, brightly colored glass bulbs, multicolored lights, and perfectly draped garland. The tree was worthy of a magazine cover, but it didn't smell like Christmas. That was a dealbreaker. From that Christmas on, Alice decided that the Jenette family would support Michigan Christmas tree farmers and buy a real tree with the rich smell of the holiday.

Alice wandered from the kitchen and up the stairs to the hall where a series of doors led to bedrooms, the places where she rocked each of her babies to sleep. When he grew into an active boy, Philip transformed his room into a shrine to basketball. Louis made his room into a 4-H trophy case. And Greta took her room through several phases: First animals, then art, and in high school, women's activism with Eleanor Roosevelt and Florence Nightingale.

Alice smiled wearily. Each room was different now. A guest bed. An office. The babies were grown and gone, and they'd done what they could to make each space feel like it wasn't missing a specific person.

Back downstairs, the dining room was rich with memory, too: Many family suppers, each filled with spirited discourse which Alice and Andrew had encouraged. It was a family rule that the evening meal was sacred time. Except for very extenuating circumstances, each member of the family was expected for supper. Alice taught each child to cook in the enormous kitchen leading to incredibly satisfying results: Each kid had grown into an accomplished cook. This led to a cherished family tradition of preparing foods from the Alsace/Lorraine region in what was once Germany and now France, the ancestral origin of the Jenette family line. Alice grinned at the thought of teaching her kids to make *flammkuchen*, a bacon and onion tart known colloquially as Alsatian pizza; sauerkraut and pork sausages, *baeckeoffe*, which was Alsatian meat and vegetable stew; Quiche Lorraine; stollen; and *kugelhöpf*, a bundt cake studded with raisins and almonds which the family came to expect every Christmas. Most of the ingredients for these special dishes came from the farm.

Alice shuddered at the flood of memories. These moments, these interactions—they weren't just keepsakes of the mind. They were the very fabric of what defined them as a family.

Could they really just sell and let it all go?

Yet they had to. The house was too big now. It had been modernized over the years with drywall interiors, central heat and air, and gas inserts in the several fireplaces. There were five bedrooms, but only she and her husband lived there anymore. The master even had an en suite bathroom. They had converted some of the space—Andrew had an office where he conducted all the farm business—but they kept finding themselves with far more space to work with than they needed, or even wanted anymore.

Every square inch of that space was full of memories, the echoes of life's best moments. Seeing Andrew on his back, gasping for breath had sparked something in her. Maybe it was panic. Maybe it was cold, brutal reality. She wanted to believe that moving on would be best for the family.

But standing in the vast, silent space, Alice was no longer so sure.