

"Delicious as always, my dear," Frank smiled, wiping his mouth with one hand and taking his wife's hand in the other.

"Oh, it's nothing special," Hestia replied, blushing slightly.

"But it *is* special; you made it, and *that* makes it special," the middle-aged fox said earnestly.

Hestia chuckled. "You're sweet," she replied.

Frank frowned slightly. "Is everything all right?" he asked. "You seem a little...I dunno, distracted?"

Hestia pursed her lips, then smiled and shook her head. "You know me too well," she said.

Frank raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"It's just the girls," Hestia said. "I really hope this vacation helps. They used to be so close, before the—"

"I'm sure it'll do wonders," Frank said, rising and going around the table to take both her hands in his.

"They love each other. Siblings quarrel; it's perfectly normal."

Hestia sighed. "I know. It's just...what if they don't?"

"I wouldn't worry—"

Frank's mollification was interrupted by the cuckoo clock, and he jumped slightly in surprise.

"Is it really 10:00 already?" he asked, shaking his head.

"Seems earlier than that, doesn't it?" Hestia replied.

Frank nodded. Looking at the clock brought a smile to his face.

"Best purchase I ever made," he said coyly.

Hestia rolled her eyes. "Now don't go trying to change the subject," she teased.

"I'm serious!" Frank said emphatically. "Nothing has proven as reliable as that clock you made."

"All those years ago," Hestia replied, reminiscing as they started cleaning up the dishes.

Frank adjusted his glasses and swallowed nervously, exhaling sharply as he opened the door to the clock shop. Clicks, clacks, ticks, and tocks immediately resounded in his ears. The 23-year-old couldn't help but look around him in amazement at all the artfully crafted timepieces around him. Glass shelves arranged all around the tiny shop showcased dozens—if not hundreds—of handmade clocks and watches. Some were made of wood and painted in intricate detail. Others were brass and simple: a brass perpetual calendar said May 20, 1985. It was a date that would be etched in his memory for life. Over in the corner stood an ornate grandfather clock whose pendulum swung side to side with a resounding *tock* that could be clearly heard above the din of the other clocks, though it wasn't any louder than the others. The fox paused and marveled at it, momentarily forgetting why he was at the shop in the first place.

"Uh, Frank, right?" a voice asked.

Startled, Frank looked up to see a pretty young fox standing behind the register. His stomach leapt into his throat, and he opened his mouth several times, unable to say anything. Fortunately, his legs worked a bit better than his mouth did, and they carried him carefully around the many shelves without bumping a single clock.

"Um...hi, Hestia," Frank finally managed, his voice squeaking out.

"Hi, Frank," Hestia replied quizzically. "Looking for a...clock?"

"Oh, uh..." Frank stammered.

Think, Frank, think! Why are you here, stalking your customer's daughter where she works?

"I..."

Gotta do better than that! She's looking at you...

...With those pretty, blue eyes...

"Frank?"

The fox gasped again. Hestia was looking at him expectantly, leaned almost all the way over the counter and waving her hand in front of his face. He grinned sheepishly.

"Uh, yeah," he said finally.

Well done.

"So...you *are* looking for a clock?" Hestia asked skeptically. "You don't really strike me as a clock-connoisseur."

Frank blew out a breath. "Okay, I admit it," he confessed. "I—I'm not. I mean, these all look really cool and all, but...I really just wanted an excuse to talk to you again."

The vixen blushed and smiled.

"Really?" she asked, twirling her hair shyly.

"Yeah," he admitted. Swallowing, he said hesitantly, "You're not recoiling in revulsion. That's...good, right?"

Hestia laughed and patted his hand. "Of course it is! As long as we're confessing things to each other, I kinda wanted to see you again, too."

Frank's heart skipped a beat. "You did?" he asked.

"Uh, huh," she replied, leaning forward a little bit more.

Frank's voice once again refused to work as elation and nervousness combined to form a very bewildering emotion. He opened his mouth to speak a few times but couldn't get what he wanted to say out. He stepped back from the counter abruptly.

"What can you tell me about this one?" he asked, picking up a clock shaped like a log cabin and pretending to examine it minutely.

Hestia frowned and blinked, confused. "It's—" she started, but fumbled for words.

I've described that clock a hundred times! What's wrong with me? she wondered, frustrated.

But then she caught Frank looking back at her furtively, and she smiled. She wasn't going to have to describe it at all. She reached forward and put her hand on Frank's. They both gasped as he nearly dropped the clock but saved it just in time. He hastily put it back on the counter.

"Sorry," he whispered.

"It's okay," Hestia said encouragingly, taking his now-free hand in hers. She *did* let out a breath of relief, though.

Frank looked up into her blue eyes and saw nothing but warmth and encouragement. He smiled faintly, feeling bolder, and took her other hand in his.

"When you and your dad came to the dealership, I have to admit that I was really distracted," he said. "I mean, I'm a good salesman and take really good care of my clients, but...it was just really hard to concentrate on your dad when I saw you there."

"Oh, uh...I'm sorry," Hestia replied, starting to pull away.

"No, I—I liked it," Frank added quickly, squeezing her hands and grinning. "It's not every day someone walks into the dealer that sweeps me off my feet."

Hestia blushed again.

"I don't mean to distract you at work," Frank said, suddenly realizing the irony and letting go of her hands. "I just—there's something I wanted to say, so I'll say it and then leave you alone."

"Oh, you don't have to worry," Hestia replied. "My parents are out taking the car for a drive right now, actually." She shrugged. "And it's Monday; you're the first person to come in all day." She leaned forward. "I could use a distraction," she hinted.

"Oh! Well, in that case," Frank chuckled nervously, "Let me say what I came to say before I can't say it."

Hestia nodded encouragingly. He took a deep breath and let it out.

"Hestia, will you go on a date with me?" he asked, spitting all his words together in his haste to get them out and panting afterwards like he'd run a marathon.

"Sorry, what?" she asked.

A pained expression crossed Frank's face, and he whimpered. "Will you," he said very slowly, "Go..." He swallowed hard. A lump was quickly forming in his throat that threatened to choke off his speech again. "On a date with me?" he managed.

"Yes!" Hestia exclaimed, jumping in the air and clapping.

Frank let out a huge sigh of relief. "Wow, really?" he asked, almost in shock.

"Yes! I'd love to go on a date with you, Frank!" Hestia replied. "Where? When?"

Frank pursed his lips. "Well, you remember how when you were at the dealer and I mentioned sushi? I thought I saw your ears prick up when I said that. Do you want to go get some?"

"That'd be great!"

"Tomorrow at 6:00?"

"Definitely! Tomorrow's my day off."

Frank held his breath. "So...it's a date?"

Hestia nodded and grinned.

"Wow," Frank said, shaking his head.

"What?" Hestia asked, confused at his reaction.

"I just—well, you're so pretty and so nice, and I just...well, I didn't think I had a chance," Frank admitted.

Hestia laughed. "If you sold yourself half as well as you sold cars, just about every girl would go on a date with you, Frank," she said with a wink.

Now it was Frank's turn to blush.

"Aww...shucks," he managed. He cleared his throat and again turned his attention to the clock. "So, uh, as long as we're busy distracting each other, what *can* you tell me about this clock?"

Hestia smiled. "That one's special," she said. "It was made five years ago in the style of a Thomas Kinkade painting."

"*A Father's Perfect Day?*" Frank asked, peering at the figurine.

Hestia gasped. "Yes! You know it?"

Frank grinned. "My mom owned one of the estate editions. She was a *huge* fan."

Hestia frowned. "What changed?"

Frank's ears lowered a bit. "She died," he said.

"Oh," Hestia said, squeezing his hand. "I'm sorry..."

"It's all right," he replied. "She...well, I'm pretty sure she worked herself to death." He shook his head. "Anyway, you were saying?"

"Oh, right," Hestia said hurriedly, "Well, yes, it was made in the style of *A Father's Perfect Day*. As you can see, the door opens up to let the cuckoo out."

She reached over and moved the hands to make the clock strike the hour.

"Wow, it comes right out onto the porch!" Frank said, impressed. "It could well live there!"

"Harold," Hestia said.

"Huh?" Frank asked.

"The bird's name is Harold," Hestia replied.

"Harold the cuckoo," Frank chuckled. "All right."

"The movement is brass, hand-cut to provide very precise timing." She picked the clock up and flipped it over. "It uses the traditional pine cone weights, each hand-cast. Notice that the clock has two weights: one is for time-keeping, and the other one makes the cuckoo sing."

Frank nodded.

"And then, of course, the part that you can see. The exterior was hand-carved and painted to bring the painting to life."

"Wow, that's a *ton* of work!" Frank said, whistling appreciatively. "How long did it take?"

"About a year," Hestia replied. "Not all of the clocks in here take that long; for many of them, we use off-the-shelf movements, but this one was special."

"I'm sure!" Frank agreed emphatically. "I'll bet that with all that work and detail put into it, it must cost a pretty penny!"

"Oh, it's not for—"

Hestia stopped abruptly. She was so used to saying it wasn't for sale that it almost slipped out. She glanced inconspicuously at Frank, who seemed to be completely engrossed in every intricate detail of the craftsmanship. She swallowed. Did she dare? Would he accept the price or try to talk her down? Surely he wouldn't? He *must* see the value in the clock, right?

"Two hundred dollars," she said softly.

Frank blinked and frowned. "Really? That's all?" he asked, surprised as he took the bills out of his wallet and handed them to her.

"On one condition," Hestia said evenly, subtly taking a breath.

Frank cocked his head curiously.

"If you ever get tired of it, you have to give it back," Hestia said.

"Get tired of it? Why would I—"

"Promise me," Hestia said intently, looking him in the eye.

"Uh, I—I promise," Frank replied, looking back at her, a bit confused.

"Then it's sold," Hestia said quietly, putting the money in the register and handing him a receipt.

Frank smiled and looked at the clock again while Hestia allowed herself a faint smile. By the time he looked at her again, she'd hidden it.

"Now, you take good care of that clock," she said.

Frank chuckled. "I promise not to get bored of it before our date tomorrow," he said with a wink. His eyes narrowed. "It was a lot of work," he said thoughtfully, "but *all* of these clocks took a lot of work. What makes this one so special to you?"

Hestia swallowed. "It was the first one I ever made."

Frank reeled. “Wow,” he said quietly. “You—are you sure? I mean, I’d hate to take it from you.”

“I’ve never offered it for sale before,” Hestia admitted. “Just...take good care of it for me, okay?”

“Harold and his house will be safe with me,” Frank said reassuringly, taking her hand in his.

Hestia smiled. “You’re a sweet guy, you know?” she asked.

Frank blushed. “I—um...thank you,” he mumbled. “Oh!” he said, suddenly remembering, “Where do I pick you up tomorrow?”

Hestia wrote her address down on the back of a business card and handed it to him. He took it and smiled.

“Okay,” he said, nodding. “I’ll see you tomorrow. I have to get this home. I’m feeling all paranoid now!” He turned to go.

“Oh, uh, wait,” Hestia said, hastily stepping around the counter.

Before he could react, she planted a kiss on his cheek and took a step back, blushing fiercely. Frank brought his hand to feel where she’d kissed him and grinned.

“Thank you,” he said, “For everything.” He walked dazedly to the door. “See you tomorrow,” he said, looking over his shoulder as he stepped out.

“And now, 30 years later, I *still* haven’t given it back,” Frank chuckled as they cuddled on the couch together.

“I knew it was going to a good home,” Hestia said, “But I never dreamed that it’d end up being *my* home, too.”

“I *still* say you didn’t charge enough for it,” Frank chided her.

“That clock was special to me, and I to make sure it went to someone special,” Hestia replied. “Besides,” she added, running her finger over his chest, “Thirty years of putting up with me and two great kids later, I’d say *you* didn’t charge enough.”

Frank grinned. “Worth every moment,” he said. “That *was* a good date, though.”

“The best!” Hestia agreed. “You always *were* such a charmer...once you got your confidence up, that is!”

“I sure wasn’t feeling very charming when we met,” Frank admitted. “I figured it was a lost cause, but I hated to give up *that* easily!”

“And to think that if I hadn’t let my friends talk me into going surfing, we never would have met,” Hestia murmured.

“How’s that?” Frank asked.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Hestia asked, frowning. “Summer vacation had just started, and a few of my friends—Marla, Janet, and Carol—had all gotten the idea in their heads that we were going surfing. They’d talked about it for *weeks* before school let out, and we were no further than five steps out the door on the last day before they started trying to get me to go with them.”

“It’s already late afternoon,” Hestia said. “Why don’t we go in the morning so we’ll have the full day ahead of us?”

“Ooh, that’s a good point,” Janet said. “See, Hestia, that’s why you’re the smart one.”

“I dunno about that,” Hestia said, rolling her eyes.

“Well, who else would be?” Marla retorted. “Janet’s the uplifting one, Carol’s the quiet one—”

“And Marla’s the rowdy one,” Janet finished.

"All right, all right," Marla said, directing the conversation back on track, "So, we'll all meet at my place at 7:00, and we can all drive together to the beach from there."

They all agreed and went home, excited for the next day's events.

"Going surfing, hon?" Hestia's dad asked the next morning.

"Yeah, Pop," she replied, leaning up to kiss him on her way out.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" her mom asked.

"Oh, right," Hestia replied sheepishly, kissing her mom, too.

Her dad cleared his throat.

"Pop, I already kissed you!" Hestia protested.

Her dad gave a significant look across the room. Hestia followed his gaze and then did a face-palm.

"Duh!" she said.

"Kinda hard to go surfing without, you know, a surfboard," her dad laughed.

"Be safe out there, honey," her mom said.

"I will, Mama," Hestia said as she ducked out the door.

A quick drive later, she was parked in front of Marla's house.

"Early, as usual," Marla chuckled.

"Must be that precision timekeeping," Hestia laughed.

"I dunno," Marla replied. "I think you need to set your clock back fifteen minutes."

"Then I'd be late!" Hestia protested.

"Just like the rest of us!" Janet said, walking up. "Hey, where's Carol?"

"She's upstairs, getting ready," Marla said.

"No, I'm here," a quiet voice said.

The girls looked around Marla to see her standing there.

"Sneaky ferret," Marla said, her eyes narrowing teasingly.

Carol blushed.

"Okay, let's get this road on the show!" Marla said, picking up her surfboard.

The girls followed behind her, and they all loaded their surfboards into the back of the dilapidated jalopy of a pickup. She got the boards padded and strapped in while they all piled into the tiny cab.

"Ooh, this'll be fun!" Janet said. "It's been way too long since we've been!"

"Yeah!" Hestia agreed. "Geez, I don't know if I can even remember how to get on!"

"Oh, please," Marla laughed, "You're the best surfer we have!"

Hestia rolled her eyes but didn't argue; she'd been the one to get the others into surfing several years back, and it was still her second-biggest passion (after clock-making, that is).

It didn't take long for them to reach the beach, and as soon as the truck pulled to a stop, the girls opened the door and practically fell out onto the sand.

"Oh, *boy*, this is gonna be fun!" Hestia said excitedly.

The smell of the beach, the feel the sand, the wash of the surf: it all beckoned her into the ocean, and she quickly grabbed her board and took off at a sprint for it. It was an abnormally hot year, and it was already balmy outside. The cool water hitting her fur and skin immediately made her feel even *more* invigorated.

"Hestia, wait up!" Janet called.

"Geez, we shoulda gone yesterday if you were gonna be *this* eager!" Marla laughed.

With a splash, the two of them plunged in and began paddling towards Hestia. Carol followed some steps behind and waded out a little more cautiously.

"Ooh, here's the first one! Dibs!" Hestia called.

Not that the others would have fought her for it; she was already twice as close to the wave as they were. She whipped her board around and began paddling back towards them at a breakneck pace.

The wave caught up to her, and just at the right time, she hopped up onto her board, planted her feet, and pivoted the board around to ride along the wave.

"Yeah, Hestia! Show that wave who's boss!" Marla cheered.

The wave began to break, and Hestia grinned.

First barrel of the day? Hell yeah!

She kept her feet firmly planted and ducked down as the crest began to break over her.

"Whoo hoo!" she yelled.

"Hey, um, guys?" Carol said.

"Huh, oh, uh, what is it, Carol?" Marla asked, distracted.

"Are those rocks?"

"Rocks? Where?"

Carol pointed, and Marla's eyes grew wide. *Crap.*

"Hestia! Bail!" Marla yelled. The others joined in, yelling as loudly as they could.

With the roar of the wave all around her, Hestia was on cloud 9. She spied the end of the barrel and focused all her attention on it. The wave sped up as it began to collapse, and she dug her heel in and zipped towards the exit.

"Hestia! Get out of there!" the girls yelled.

This was it: she was nearly out. Hestia couldn't believe it: over a year since the last time she'd surfed, and now she was about to complete a barrel on the first time back on her board.

In her focus on exiting, she didn't see as the wave crashed into the rocks. Her board followed the wave, slammed into the rocks, flipped out from under her, and flung her into the air. The tether on her foot yanked on the board, jerking her backward and the board forward, and then they both crashed into the ocean. She felt sudden, blinding pain as her arm snapped against the rock.

Don't scream...don't scream...don't scream... she willed herself with everything she had.

Her head went underwater.

It hurts so badly!

Don't scream! Got to get to the surface.

"Ahh!" she cried underwater as she tried to use her arm to swim upward.

Stop screaming! Use your legs! Kick!

Hestia was glad for that little voice inside of her that could remain calm, no matter what. She forced her eyes open, enduring the stinging water to orient herself, and then kicked for dear life and used her good arm to head toward the surface. But the pain in her arm was so awful, she wanted to throw up.

Not now. Make it to shore first!

Her head broke the water, and she gasped in a lungful of air. Her board floated to her, and she sprawled over it, wincing. The pain in her arm made her so tired. If she could just rest a bit...

No! Stay awake. Make it to shore!

But that was so *hard!* Just a *little* rest...

Her friends made it to her just in time to catch her before she fell off her board.

"Quick, we gotta get her back to shore!" Marla yelled.

Between the three of them, they quickly pulled their friend back to the beach.

Hestia awoke with a gasp. White sheets. Walls—a room!—a chair. Where was she? Beeping. Beeping faster! She turned to look and see a heart monitor. She gasped again, this time in surprise. A...a hospital?

"There she is," a voice said.

She whipped her head around the other way to see her parents and friends all huddled beside her.

"Oh, thank God you're all right!" her mom said.

"Gave us a scare there, kiddo," her dad chimed in, looking both exhausted and relieved at the same time.

"What—what happened?" Hestia asked.

"That was a gnarly wipeout," Marla said, wincing.

"Don't you remember?" Carol asked worriedly. "You were surfing and ran into the rocks."

Hestia frowned, and then it began to come back to her.

"Oh, right!" she said, sighing. "Man, I *had* that wave, too!"

"You really did," Janet agreed. "If it weren't for those rocks..."

"Who put those there anyway?" Marla demanded. "I don't remember them being there last time!"

"That was a different beach," Carol said.

"Oh, uh, right," Marla said sheepishly.

Hestia chuckled in spite of herself and shook her head. She started to stretch when she suddenly realized she couldn't move her right arm. She gasped and looked down to find it in a cast.

"Augh!" she cried.

"It's gonna be okay, honey," her mom said quickly. "It's just for a month or so."

"Like half of summer vacation," Hestia groaned.

"Hang in there, kiddo," her dad said reassuringly. "We'll make it as pleasant as we can."

"And you can bet we'll be there to keep you too distracted to think about it!" Marla grinned.

"I'd forgotten all about Marla," Frank said, chuckling. "How is that crazy old bat?"

"Either splattered on the pavement somewhere, or still living life to the fullest," Hestia said wryly, shaking her head. "Anyway, I had actually just gotten my cast off the day before we met. My dad suggested that maybe I should go with him instead of working on clocks the first day I had use of my arm, and I figured it was probably a good idea to heed his advice. Besides, he has this nasty habit of talking himself out of things."

"I'm glad you went with him," Frank said, kissing her tenderly. "You were definitely a sight for sore eyes."

Frank was elated; he'd already sold three cars, and it wasn't even lunch. Given the average salesman only sells ten cars a *month*, he was *definitely* on a roll! His step definitely had a bit of bounce in it as he closed the door of the car he'd just sold and waved the new owners off.

"How do you *do* it, Frank?" his boss asked, shaking his hand. "You're on fire!"

Frank chuckled. "I just—I dunno; I'm just honest with people," he said. "I listen to what they want and try to help them find the right car for *them*. It's not about upselling; a lower-gross car sold today is better than no car sold because I tried to push someone into a bad-fitting car."

His boss shook his head and grinned. "Well, just keep doing what you're doing; it's working!"

Frank sighed contentedly. Could today *get* any better? Little did he know that the best part of the day was about to walk in.

The cowbell on the door clanged, and a bespectacled gray fox in his 40s stepped inside. Frank began to stride towards him, but he faltered as soon as he saw the vixen who walked in behind the gray fox.

Wow, she's cute, Frank thought, having to use conscious thought to keep his mouth from falling open.

Keep it together, buddy, he reminded himself. *You're at work, not social hour*.

"Hello, sir," he said, extending his hand as he approached the foxes. "I'm Frank."

The older fox nodded and shook his hand. "I'm George, and this is my daughter, Hestia."

"Pleased to meet you both," Frank said, feeling a hint of giddiness as Hestia shook his hand, too. "What can I help you with today?"

"I'm looking for a new truck," George said.

"Okay, let's see. What are you going to be hauling?"

"Clocks."

"Clocks?" Frank cocked his head, puzzled.

George chuckled. "I'm a clockmaker, and I haul clocks."

"Ah, I see," Frank said, nodding. "Well, then I might suggest something enclosed. We currently have a Jimmy; it's quite spacious and handles well, or if you really need a lot of space, we have the Suburban."

George frowned. "I think I'd rather a pickup."

"Okay, well, how about a C-series? It's solid performance—unless you need four-wheel drive."

The fox shook his head. "No, I don't need four-wheel drive."

Frank nodded. "All right, well, if you'll come with me, we can go have a look at a C-series."

"Sounds great!" George said.

They walked across the showroom, and Frank opened the door for George as he began rattling off specs on the C-series. But when he turned, George and his pretty daughter weren't with him. Startled, he turned to see them stopped at a different model. He closed the door and walked back to them. George was all but salivating.

"Ah, I see you've met the Caballero," Frank chuckled, opening the door for George. "It comes standard with a 130-horsepower, 4.3-liter V6, but if you want to, we can upgrade that to a 305 V8 with 165 horsepower if you want to have some fun with it. They both come with automatic transmissions."

George seemed to have zoned out a bit at the gearhead talk, so Frank changed tactics.

"It comes with all the standard equipment: power windows, power locks, cruise control—"

"Whoa, there, slow down," George said quizzically. "What's all that?"

Frank paused. "How old is your car, George?" he asked.

"A '46 C-series," George replied.

"'46?" Frank's jaw dropped. "How—how did you get it to last all these years?" he asked.

George chuckled. "Maintenance," he replied. "They're not unlike clocks in that they need to be regularly tended and given a little love and attention. Just more complicated."

Frank chuckled. "Okay, well, then, let me show you around! See that switch?" he asked, pointing.

George nodded.

"Give it a push," Frank suggested.

The fox frowned and pressed the button. There was a loud clicking sound from all around the car. "What was that?" he demanded.

"You just locked all the doors," Frank grinned. "Now press it the other way."

There was another click as George did so, and the doors unlocked.

"Wow, that's pretty neat!" he said.

"It's been a standard feature for, eh, the last ten years or so now. It used to be that only luxury cars could have power door locks," Frank said. "But there's more, too. See that other switch there? Push it downwards."

George did as told and was amazed as his window rolled down.

"No more hand cranks," Frank grinned. "That last switch there controls the passenger side."

George beamed as he flipped the switch and saw the other window go down.

Frank chuckled and let George play with the switches a bit more before continuing.

"This truck also has cruise control," he said at last, pointing to a sliding switch on the turn signal lever.

"What's that?" George asked.

"As you're driving down the highway, when you get to the speed you want to go, you just push the button on the end of the turn signal lever here, and the Caballero will keep going that speed for you. Need to slow down for a car in front of you? Just hit the brake like always, and it will disable the cruise control. Ready to go again? Just slide this switch over to 'resume', and you're back to whatever speed you set."

"Wow, that's amazing!" George gushed.

"You can adjust the windshield wiper speed on there, too," Frank added.

He paused and gave George an expectant look. George looked back at him and laughed, "Yes, my truck *does* have windshield wipers!"

Frank chuckled. "Okay, just gotta make sure! Anyway, the Caballero really is a terrific truck, and it's great that you stopped to check it out."

Frank paused and saw George lost in thought.

"The bed is big enough to hold a sheet of plywood or drywall completely flat," he continued encouragingly. "It'll do everything you need a pickup to do."

"I want to drive it," George said abruptly.

"Absolutely!" Frank replied. "Let's go out to the lot, and I can let you test-drive one of those. For safety reasons, we're no longer allowing people to run vehicles in the showroom."

George and Hestia followed Frank. As he passed his boss, Frank made a subtle "nailed it" gesture, which his boss just as subtly acknowledged and congratulated him on.

They got outside, and the dazzling sunlight reflecting off a hundred shiny, new cars nearly blinded them.

"Now, what color were you thinking?" Frank asked as they walked out to where the Caballeros were parked.

"What colors have you got?" George asked, looking down the rows and rows of cars.

"On hand, I've got white, silver, gray, light blue, black, beige—that's that cream-colored one over there—brown, and maroon. If you want me to order one from the factory for you, I can get it in quite a few other colors. Try me: what color did you have in mind?"

"*That!*" George said, pointing.

"Great choice!" Frank answered enthusiastically. *I forgot we had that one!* "How'd you like to take it for a spin?"

"I'd love to!" George replied.

Frank opened the door, George got in, and Frank went around to the other side to open the passenger door, saying, "Older models with standard transmissions were more cramped, but with the automatic, you've got the floor free in the middle seat. Do you regularly drive a lot of people around?"

George shook his head. "As soon as this one moves out, it'll be just the missus and me."

"And I've got my own car," Hestia added.

"All right; all the better!" Frank said, nodding. "Do you want to sit in the middle or on the side?" he asked Hestia.

"I'll take the middle," Hestia replied.

Frank did his best not to grin ear-to-ear as he slid in next to her. *Boy*, she was cute!

"All right, George, fire up that engine," Frank said encouragingly, "And let's get some A/C going! It's hot enough out here to turn sushi into baked tuna!"

"A/C?" George asked.

Frank blinked. "Air conditioning?" he said.

"In a car?"

Frank laughed, patting the fox's shoulder teasingly. "Yes, George. It's been around for about a decade. Boy, look at all the great features you've been missing out on! Let me *excitedly* introduce you to my favorite of them: your air conditioning controls," Frank said, reaching over to adjust a couple of levers. "Oh, uh, sorry, Miss," he said, reddening visibly as his hand passed over Hestia.

"Don't worry; it's okay," the pretty fox replied; Frank liked the way her voice sounded.

"Yes, ah, well, um, this lever controls your fan speed," he said, turning the blower up to the maximum setting.

"Aww, Frank, I'm disappointed," George said, "I've got one of those in my '46."

Frank grinned. "But do you have *this*?" he asked, flipping the other switch.

The air quickly began to cool.

"Oh! Wow. Well, now, no... No, my truck definitely doesn't do *that!*" George replied.

"Welcome to the modern era, George," Frank beamed, patting his shoulder. "How about getting your seat adjusted? Feel along the side there, and you'll feel some switches. I'll let them explain themselves."

George did as Frank suggested, and his face lit up as the seat began to move up and down, forward and back, and tilt.

Once settled, George frowned. "Where's the shifter?" he asked.

"Oh, that's the automatic transmission," Frank said. "You just put the car in R for reverse or D for drive to go forward, and the car figures the rest out on its own! When you want to park, just put it in P."

"Huh," George said, frowning curiously. He put the truck in gear and pulled out of the parking lot.

"It's got a nice, smooth ride when it's fully loaded," Frank remarked as they drove around the block. "How do you like the handling?"

"It's nice," George nodded. "Good and responsive."

Anything is gonna be responsive after driving a '46 C-series, Frank thought to himself.

"Though I gotta admit, I feel like I'm missing my clutch!" George added.

Frank chuckled. "It *does* take some getting used to, but most people really like them." He paused. "What about the acceleration and braking? How about give it some gas at the next stop sign?" he suggested.

George nodded and floored the accelerator. The Caballero surged to life and rocketed forward *far* faster than his truck ever had. He quickly took his foot off the accelerator, but he couldn't help grinning.

"Now, this one has the Amarillo trim package on it and the 305 V8 engine," Frank said. "If you don't need that much acceleration, we can always go with the V6 instead."

George shook his head. "No, it's perfect," he said, trying unsuccessfully to stop grinning. "Absolutely perfect."

They made it around the block and returned to the dealership, and Frank had George park it out front.

"Now the part everybody hates," he said earnestly.

"Let's talk numbers," George replied resolutely.

"Well, for that specific model with power windows, air conditioning, 305 engine, power seating, and automatic transmission in jade green, you're looking at..." Frank looked at a printed price book, figuring in his head. "\$7,100 plus TT&L."

George's eyes bulged. "\$7,100?" He shook his head.

"Psst, Pop!" Hestia hissed. "Would you excuse us a minute?" she asked, and Frank nodded, stepping out of earshot.

"That's too much, hon," George said.

"Come on, Pop. You said you wanted something practical but fun. You practically drooled every time the sales guy showed you a new feature. It's not out of your budget, or at least not what you said before we left home."

"But it's just so many luxury features," George replied. "The truck has served me well all this time, and it didn't have power windows!"

"Like the sales guy said, Pop, welcome to the modern era," Hestia chuckled. "Even Marla's beaten-up truck has air conditioning!"

George hesitated.

"Try to talk him down," Hestia said. "See if he'll take \$6100. I doubt he will, but try anyway, if it'll make you feel better."

George pursed his lips. "It *is* a really great car," he confessed.

"Then treat yourself! Treat Mama. I'm sure she'll love having air conditioning, if nothing else!"

"You know your mother...she's gonna be frustrated by all the new controls and stuff," George said hesitantly.

"She'll learn. If you buy it, I promise you, Pop, she'll love it."

George nodded and motioned to Frank, who came back over.

"\$6100," George said.

Frank winced. He shook his head. "I'm sorry, George. I like you, but that's less than we paid for it. I can throw in TT&L, but that's about the best I can do. It's a pretty well-equipped model. We could maybe take out the air conditioning..."

"No!" George replied hastily. "No, uh, you were right: that's the best part," he added ruefully, "Well, other than the driving part."

Frank chuckled and then pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I'll...be right back," he said. "I have an idea. In the meantime, if you'd like some coffee or something, please help yourself."

He strode quickly over to his manager's office.

"Doug," he said, "I've got an idea. It's a little crazy, but hear me out, okay?"

Doug raised an eyebrow and leaned back in his chair. "I'm listening," he said.

"Those two foxes out there," Frank said, "They *really* like that green Caballero out there."

"Green?" Doug asked, shriveling his nose. "I didn't know we had a green one."

"Yeah, I completely forgot we had it, too," Frank admitted, "But it's the one he wants, and I really want him to have it."

"You do, do you?" his boss chuckled wryly. "And are you gonna pay"—he did the math in his head—" \$7100 for them to have it?"

Frank shook his head. "No. They offered \$6100"—Doug almost fell out of his chair—"But I told them there was no way you'd go for that."

His boss sighed in relief. "Don't scare me like that, Frank!" he said. "And after you've had such a good day, too!"

"It's still a good day," Frank replied. "But I think we should let them have it for \$6450, out the door."

Doug raised his eyebrows. "Frank, that's only...we'd only make \$50 on it. Less your commission, we're talking—"

"I won't take a commission on this one," Frank interrupted. "And we *both* forgot it was out there. What good is it doing us, sitting out there taking up space where another car could be getting sold?"

Doug pursed his lips. "You're sure you don't want a commission on this one?" he asked.

Frank shook his head. "Like I said, it's been a good day. I consider myself blessed, and I'd like them to feel that way, too."

Doug shook his head and chuckled. "You're really something, Frank," he said admiringly. "You've got a big heart, but you use your brain, too. I hope you never leave this place." He sighed and nodded. "Go ahead; I'll approve it. But not a penny less!"

"Thanks, Doug!" Frank said excitedly.

He walked briskly back to George and Hestia.

"Okay, I've got great news," Frank said.

"You're gonna let me have it for \$6100?" George asked hopefully.

"Not quite," Frank replied, "But I *can* let you have it for \$6450, out the door."

George and Hestia looked at each other, and then George nodded, beaming. "We'll take it," he said.

"Great!" Frank replied, shaking hands with George. "In that case, if you're ready, we can go ahead and get you checked out and let you drive it home today if you want."

"I do—very much!" George replied eagerly.

Frank led him down the hall and introduced him to the guy who would help him get all the paperwork taken care of, offered George coffee or water—both of which he declined—and then walked back to the showroom, where Hestia sat and waited.

“Oh, uh, Frank!” she called on seeing him.

“Yes, Miss?” he asked.

“You can call me Hestia,” she said. “You don’t have to call me ‘Miss.’”

It all came out so fast that she didn’t realize what she was saying as she said it, and she blushed a little.

“Of course, Hestia,” Frank replied, doing his best to stay professional.

“I’m curious,” she said penetratingly, “What *was* that wild thought of yours that made you suddenly go from throwing in TT&L to dropping the price by \$650 *and* TT&L?”

Frank grinned. “Now *that* I’m not at liberty to disclose,” he said. “Suffice to say, my boss and I bent some rules.”

“For us?” Hestia asked skeptically. “What’s the catch?”

Frank shook his head. “No catch.”

Hestia’s eyes narrowed. “No offense, but you’re a car salesman. There’s *always* a catch.”

Frank laughed. “I get that a lot,” he said, “And I usually reply by saying, ‘with all due respect, *you* haven’t done business with Frank Alderson before.’ It’s not about the money for me; it’s about getting customers cars they need and want. Seeing your dad’s eyes light up every time I showed him something just made my day, and I’ve already had a very good day. I wanted him to have it, so I pulled some little-used strings.” He held out his hands helplessly. “That’s all there is to it. No catch; just a decent guy.”

Hestia opened her mouth to speak, but closed it, taken aback by the fox’s earnestness. She smiled.

“You’re either a good actor, or a *really* decent guy,” she said.

“I vote the latter,” Frank chuckled. He cocked his head suddenly. “What do you do?” he asked. “Don’t you ever feel like you want to do something nice for one of your customers?”

Hestia opened her mouth, hesitated, and then said, “I’m a clockmaker. I work in my father’s shop.”

Frank raised his eyebrows, “Wow, chip off the old block, huh?” he asked.

Hestia nodded. “It’s good, honest work. It takes a lot of time and care, but when it’s all done, it’s a reflection of me. I pour myself into the clocks I make.”

“I get that,” Frank said, nodding appreciatively. “I don’t build anything,” he said, “But I *do* pour myself into my work. I want every one of my customers to be as happy when they leave here as your dad was when I left him.”

Hestia smiled and nodded.

“So, uh,” Frank said hesitantly.

Don’t do it...

“Other than making clocks, what do you do for fun?” he finished.

Thin ice, buddy. She’s a customer, and you don’t want to give her the wrong idea!

“I like to surf,” Hestia replied. “Or, I used to. I’m a bit nervous now,” she said, running her fingers over her arm.

“Is something wrong?” Frank asked.

Hestia shook her head. “No, it’s just—well, I had a wipeout and broke my arm. I *just* got the cast off yesterday. Pop said I should probably let my arm rest a bit, get used to moving around a bit before getting

back to clock-making.” She sighed, “Ugh, this month has been boring! I’m so ready to get back to doing things I like to do!”

Frank chuckled. “I totally understand,” he replied. “I broke my leg riding my bike in 7th grade. First day off for summer vacation, stuck with that stupid thing half the summer!”

“Yes! Exactly!” Hestia replied emphatically.

“The moral of this story is, ‘don’t break things,’” Frank laughed ruefully.

“Yeah,” Hestia replied, frowning at her arm as if it were to blame.

“Ah, here you are,” George said. “Ready to go?”

“All set, George?” Frank asked.

“Yeah,” George replied, giving him a quizzical glance. “The guy with the paperwork looked at me like I was crazy when I told him the price and then had to go talk to the manager. You didn’t pull a fast one or anything, did you?”

Frank shook his head. “You paid \$6450, right?” he asked.

George nodded.

“Then that was it,” Frank replied. “It was a little unorthodox on my end, but totally legal and above-board. I just really wanted to see you go home in that Caballero, George,” he said.

George blinked. “Wow, that’s...thank you!” he said, shaking Frank’s hand.

“My pleasure!” Frank replied. “Shall we get you two headed home?”

The foxes nodded, and Frank led them back outside.

“Take the truck?” George said to Hestia, handing her the key.

Hestia nodded.

“It was nice meeting you folks,” Frank said as he opened the door for George and closed it behind him.

“You, too, Frank, and thanks again!” George replied as the Caballero’s engine roared to life.

“Hestia, it was nice meeting you, too,” Frank said, opening the door to the ’46.

Wow, that thing is old!

“It was nice meeting you, too, Frank,” Hestia said, smiling up at him.

They both hesitated, feeling like there was something that needed to be said but neither having the courage to say it. Finally, Hestia started the truck and followed her dad out. Frank waved them off.

“He *still* loves that truck!” Hestia chuckled. “I swear, he’ll make us bury him in it if he has his way!” She turned to him and frowned. “What *did* you do exactly to drop the price so much?”

Frank grinned. “I gave up my commission.”

Hestia’s jaw dropped. “Really? For us?”

Frank nodded.

“But we didn’t even have a date planned, yet. You hadn’t even come to see me!”

“It wasn’t about that,” Frank replied. “If it had been, I would have said something about it—you know, to hedge my bets or something. But that would have made me look like a pig, and that wasn’t what it was about.”

Hestia laughed. “And you didn’t have to buy my dad a car to be with me, after all,” she said, smooching him sweetly on the lips.

Frank kissed her back, and they smiled, cuddling together.

"You *did* tell me," he admitted. "I'd forgotten, but you did tell me that you'd broken your arm."

"Aww, you and your memory," Hestia teased him.

"Hey, at least I remember the day I got that job," Frank retorted, chuckling.

Frank nodded to himself. He'd finally figured out what he was going to do with his life—at least for now. He put on some slacks and a polo shirt and hopped in his car. Ten minutes later, he was at his destination.

"Hi, welcome to Badger Motors. What can I help you find today?" a cheerful otter asked.

"Hi, there, Bryan," Frank replied, reading the otter's name tag. "I'm actually looking for a job. Are there any sales positions open?"

Bryan pursed his lips. "I don't think so," he said, "But let me take you to Doug, the general manager."

Frank thanked him and was quickly led to the manager's office.

"Here you go," Bryan said, ushering Frank in.

"What can I do for you?" the burly badger asked, standing and extending a huge hand.

"It's actually what I can do for you, Mr. Ironhide," Frank replied, shaking his hand. "I'm Frank Alderson. I'm looking for a job, and I think I'd make a good addition to your sales team."

"Please, call me 'Doug,'" the badger replied, sitting and gesturing for Frank to do the same. "Do you have a résumé?"

Frank handed him a sheet of paper, and Doug scanned it quickly, frowning thoughtfully.

"I don't see any actual work experience on here," he said. "Some volunteering, but would this be your first job?"

Frank pursed his lips and nodded. "Everybody's got to start somewhere," he said, "And I have excellent customer service skills, thanks to all of the hours of volunteering."

Doug shook his head. "I'm sorry, Frank, but I need someone experienced. Business has been slow, and while I *could* use a sales guy, I can't afford to spend a bunch of time paying a trainee."

Frank nodded and stood. "Thank you for your consideration, Doug."

The badger nodded, and Frank took his leave.

As he was leaving, a raccoon approached him.

"Excuse me," she said. "I'm looking for a car to get my kids to school and soccer practice. What would you suggest?"

Without missing a beat, Frank put a hand on the woman's shoulder and led her over towards the SUVs. "How big is your family?" he asked.

"My husband, myself, and two kids," she replied.

Frank nodded. "Well, you've got a few options, then," he said. "The Jimmy is a relatively new addition to the GMC lineup and will hold the driver and up to four passengers, plus some space in the back for soccer bags, water bottles and such."

They reached the floor model, and he began pointing out the different features.

"Can I help you folks?" a voice said behind them.

They turned to see Doug standing behind them. The raccoon frowned. "I'm...already being helped," she said quizzically.

"Uh, Frank, can I see you a minute in my office?" Doug asked nicely, while Bryan took over helping the raccoon.

"Sure, Doug. Please excuse me, Miss," Frank replied.

As they were walking away, the raccoon said, "Yes, I'd like to pay cash."

Doug's ears pricked up, and he glanced sidelong at Frank as they walked.

"What'd you say to her?" he asked.

Frank shrugged. "She told me she needed something to transport her kids to school and soccer practice. The Jimmy seemed like a good fit for her, so I started telling her about it."

Doug pursed his lips and nodded slowly. "In my thirty years of selling cars, I've never seen anyone land a sale in five minutes before. I guess that customer service you talked about really pays off!"

Frank smiled. "Just treating others the way I'd want to be treated," he said humbly.

"Well, I'll tell you what: I know *you'd* like to be treated to having a job, so how about you come work for me?" Doug said with a smile.

Frank's face lit up. "Really?" he asked, "But I thought you said you couldn't afford to train me?"

Doug chuckled. "I should be getting *you* to train the others!" he said. "I listened to you talking before I approached, and you clearly know your stuff! Why didn't you mention that when we talked?"

Frank blushed. "I dunno..." he said. "I'm good at talking about *other* things, but not so much about myself."

Doug clapped him on the shoulder. "Well, it's something to work on," he said, "But in the meantime, feel free to sell as many of my trucks as you like! Welcome aboard!"

"Treating others the way you want to be treated...it's such a good mantra, isn't it?" Hestia asked, hugging Frank close.

"If there was anything my mother taught me, that was it," Frank agreed, hugging her back. He paused, then added, "It helps that I didn't *need* the money."

Hestia looked at him and nodded slowly. "Your mom was well-to-do, wasn't she?"

Frank nodded. "Not bad for a single mother, that's for sure," he replied. "It was sad when she died, but she did leave us with plenty to never have to work if we chose not to."

"I know this must be a difficult time for you both," said Mr. Biggsword, the executor, a rotund, orange cat wearing a suit that was too tight for him.

Frank opened his mouth to speak, but Karen, his sister, piped up first. "Yeah, it is, so let's not make this take any longer than it has to, okay?"

Frank closed his eyes and exhaled sharply. He realized Karen was still grieving in her own way, but she could come off so *callous* at times.

"The late Andrea Alderson wanted to make sure you were both well-cared-for," replied the executor. "I have her will here and will now read the excerpt pertaining to you."

He cleared his throat.

"Kids, I am sorry that I was not able to spend more time with you. If you're hearing this, then I assume that I have passed on. My biggest regret is that I worked as much as I did and didn't spend as much time with you as I could have. It was hard enough for you, growing up without a father, let alone with a mother too busy to spend time with you."

Karen huffed. Frank couldn't tell whether it was in remorse or indignation. As for Frank, he wished they had had more time together, but he did understand where his mom was coming from.

"I could not provide for you the way I wanted to in life, but I hope that I can provide plenty for you in death."

Tears came to Frank's eyes. *No, Mom, don't think that!* he thought.

"Karen, I am leaving the mansion to you. Take good care of it; it's been in the family for six generations, and I hope that it will last six more."

Karen nodded in satisfaction, glancing at Frank with a look that said, "I told you so." They'd had a bit of a debate some years prior, with Frank believing it would be left to him, since he typically did a better job of caring for things. At the time, it was all sibling rivalry stuff. Now, Frank sighed, trying to be understanding of Karen's grieving process but wishing she'd be a bit more delicate about things.

At least she wasn't giving him a noogie...

He gestured for Mr. Biggsword to please continue.

"Frank, I want you to have the summer house. We always had such pleasant memories there, and I hope that when you find a wife, the two of you can have many more."

Frank smiled wistfully and nodded. They *had* made a lot of fond memories there. It was where he'd learned to ride a bicycle, in fact, and he could still feel his mom there, letting go of the bicycle seat as he took his maiden trip without training wheels.

"Finally, to ensure that you are both always well-cared-for, I am leaving you each seven million dollars. Spend it wisely, and it will last you a lifetime. Please, don't spend it all at once. I love you both and wish you as much happiness and success as you can find."

Frank smiled wanly. Andrea might not have been very good at devoting time to them, but the time she did spend with them was quality time. She might not have made it to any of this school activities, but it was a quality over quantity thing with her. Even her dying words reminded him of that.

"Now," said Mr. Biggsword, interrupting Frank's reminiscing, "Your mother also had letters for each of you and requested that you read them here in my office."

He handed them each a sealed envelope. Frank looked at it; his name was written in his mother's own handwriting. He flipped it over and opened it.

Dear Frank,

You were always my favorite, and I have the highest hopes for you. I'm sorry that I won't be there to see it. Please continue to be what you always have been: a kind, loving boy. Please look after your sister. She may be older than you, but she's still got a lot of maturing to do. I hope that you will find someone you love and settle down happily together, and I hope that this inheritance will make it so that you and your family will never want for anything. I love you, Son.

Love,

Mom

Frank smiled and was about to put the letter back in the envelope when Karen scoffed, "Ugh."

Frank frowned and looked up in surprise as his sister stuffed her letter back in the envelope, nodded wordlessly to Mr. Biggsword, and walked out, muttering, "She *still* doesn't trust me."

Frank and Mr. Biggsword looked at each other helplessly.

"Did you ever figure out what it was all about?" Hestia asked.

Frank shook his head. "The best I can tell, I think Mom must have put her money into a trust to make sure she couldn't take it all out at once. Karen was always rather impulsive with money."

Hestia nodded. "And what about the mansion? I haven't ever heard you talk about it?"

Frank sighed. "She hasn't kept it up very well—much like I predicted—but she still has it," he said sadly.

He chuckled, seeing Hestia's alarmed expression, and added, "It's not like it's fit to be condemned, but last I checked, it's a far cry from the splendor that it used to have. That house had a life of its own, and the last time I was there, it seemed...I dunno, like a ghost of its old self."

Hestia shook her head. "That's so sad. Maybe one of these days, it'll have its former vitality restored."

They both looked up as the clock struck 11:00.

Frank cocked his head thoughtfully. "Tell me about that clock," he said.

Hestia chuckled. "What, that old thing?"

"Please?" Frank asked earnestly, kissing her lips tenderly.

"Oh, all right. Since you asked nicely," Hestia replied, winking teasingly.

Hestia held her breath. Looking through the lenses of a magnifying visor and using tweezers, she painstakingly fitted the last gear into the train and carefully pulled the tweezers back as not to disturb the delicate mechanism. Then she took the back plate and positioned it over the gears, carefully aligning each one so that everything could lock into place. Pulling her hands back carefully, she finally let herself breathe, letting out a careful breath before securing the back plate with screws.

This was it: the moment of truth. She held up the movement and pulled on the chain to lift the time-keeping weight, then started her test pendulum swinging in time to a clock Pop had built earlier that year. She listened carefully, and the two clocks seemed to keep pace with each other.

"Yes!" Hestia hissed. If the clock needed calibration, that was one thing. But if it couldn't keep pace at all, that meant her wheel train had a problem. She'd need to run it for 24 hours to be certain, but for now, she was confident enough that she could put it into the clock and see how everything looked.

Her hands trembled with excitement as she opened the front of the cuckoo clock she'd made, feeling how easily the front face swung on the hinges she'd installed. With the "door" closed, the clock looked almost exactly like a log cabin, with no obvious gap between the front and sides. But if you knew where to press—and Hestia did, since she'd designed and built it herself—the front would swing open, giving full access to the movement inside. Having helped her dad repair countless clocks, from just retrieving tools as a 10-year old to getting to use the ultrasonic cleaner at 12 (with supervision) to buffing the gears and lathing the pivots at 14, she'd seen *many* clocks and had formed an idea of what she wanted in her first one.

The most important thing was that it was simple to operate and easily accessible. Far too many clocks she'd worked on had numerous moving parts barely held together and spring-loaded, making disassembling them treacherous. More than once, she'd sent parts flying across the room when she missed releasing a spring here or there. She didn't want that, and she also didn't want to have to spend hours carefully taking apart the case just to get to the movement.

Hence her design. Slots underneath let the chains and suspension be slid in with the movement from the front with the front face open, rather than having to try to fish them through barely-big-enough holes, route them through the movement in place, and then pass them back through equally barely-big-enough holes. The case she'd build had a spot specially constructed for her to slip the entire movement in. All she had to do then was close the front face and put the hands on. She was proud of her design, and her dad had been impressed. That meant the world to her, since he was the smartest person she knew when it came to clocks.

Of course, she'd spent weeks building the case, too, and using tiny brushes to paint individual logs and tar between them, just like the painting she was using as a reference. The colors were perfect, and holding the two side-by-side, she couldn't tell them apart...except her clock was three-dimensional and actually *worked!*

She held her breath again as she fitted the movement into the case and screwed it down. Her heart skipped a beat as she closed the door neatly over the center-post and lovingly put the hands on. She pulled the other chain to wind the cuckoo and slowly turned the hands to make the clock strike the hour.

The front door of the clock flew open, and a little cuckoo sat in the doorway, flapping his wings and singing.

"Good job, Harold," Hestia grinned as the little bird disappeared and the door closed. "Pop!" she yelled, jumping up and running into the other room, "Come look!"

Her parents both followed the nearly-bouncing 18-year-old into the shop and watched breathlessly as she turned the hands to make it strike the next hour. The door opened, and the cuckoo popped back out to greet everybody.

"That's my girl!" George said, clapping her on the shoulder. "Ah, you're a Rivers for sure!"

He and her mom hugged her tightly.

"We're so proud of you, honey!" her mom said.

"Thanks, Mama," Hestia grinned.

"Welcome to the family business, kiddo," her dad said. "The fourth generation!"

"I thought he would pop, his chest puffed out so much!" Hestia laughed. "He's a great man."

"And you're a great lady," Frank replied, giving her a smooch. He pointed at the clock, "And a great clock-maker."

"It's all his fault, you know," Hestia said. "He got me hooked early. Like the first time I got to help actually *build* a clock instead of just repairing old ones."

"Looking good, Hestia," George said, looking over her shoulder. "Wow, you even painted the beak?"

Hestia grinned and nodded.

"You've got better eyes than I do," he chuckled ruefully. "And steadier hands!"

"Aww, I dunno about that, Pop," Hestia said, rolling her eyes.

"No, it's true," her mom said from the register. "His hands aren't quite as steady as they used to be."

"Steady enough to teach me, though," Hestia said encouragingly. Her dad grinned, nodded, and went back to his workbench.

"How about you, Pop?" Hestia asked. "Is the clock almost ready for Fred?"

"Fred?" her mom asked.

"The cuckoo," Hestia said. "You *know* I'm gonna name every one of them, Mama."

"That's our girl," her mom laughed.

The bells on the door jingled.

"Peggy, would you...?" George asked, glancing toward the door.

Hestia's mom nodded and stepped around the counter. "Hi there! What can I help you find?" she asked the customer.

Hestia returned her attention to the tiny wooden bird, making sure to keep paint off the hinges that would hold its wings and attach its body to its tiny, metal legs as she painted individual feathers on him.

The door jingled again as the customer left just as Hestia put down the cuckoo's body. She picked up his wings—all one piece for simplicity—and began painting both the top and bottom of them, giving him little

white tips on his otherwise mottled-brown wings. When she finished, she stood them on their edge to let them dry and went to help her mom in the shop. It was a slow day, and the time kinda dragged on as she waited for her dad to finish the rest of the clock.

"There. That'll about do it," George said a while later. "Hey, Hestia! Ready to put it all together?" he asked.

Hestia's ears pricked up, and she quickly made her way to her workbench. The paint was dry, so she carefully fitted the wings into the wire hinge that held them onto Fred's body and took the assembled, legless bird over to her father.

"Here you go, Pop," she said, holding it out to him.

George shook his head. "Not this time," he said. "This time, *you* get to put it together."

Hestia's eyes widened. "Really, Pop?" she asked excitedly.

"If you can paint with that much detail, assembling it ought to be a piece of cake!" George replied, chuckling and stepping aside to give his daughter access to his workbench.

"Now, just move the lever to extend the cuckoo's—er, Fred's—perch and open the door," George instructed. "I haven't put the spring on it, yet, because there's no sense in having to fight it."

Hestia nodded, put Fred down, and looked into the clock to find the right lever. She moved it, and the door opened, and a barren perch with only two little legs slid out.

"Perfect, hon! Now, there are three linkages you've got to make: his legs to his body, the rocking arm to his body, and the flapping arm to his wings. Can you find those linkages?"

Hestia looked carefully and found two tiny wires that didn't attach to anything. "These?" she asked.

George nodded. "Right, and his legs form the third linkage. Now, how would you go about attaching them?"

Hestia started to put Fred onto the legs, but George stopped her.

"Think forward," he said. "Those linkages are kinda hard to get to, right? They'll be even *worse* once his body's stuck to his legs.

Hestia pursed her lips. "That makes sense," she said. "Which one should I start with?"

"Which one's the hardest to get to?" George hinted.

"The body?" Hestia replied, and George nodded and smiled.

Taking a pair of tweezers, Hestia reached into the clock and picked up one of the wires. Holding Fred in her other hand, she carefully looped the wire around a tiny staple in Fred's back and twisted it around itself.

"How's that look?" she asked.

George traded places with her and used his visor to examine the connection.

"Looks great, hon! And you put the right linkage on there, too! Go ahead and trim the wire."

Hestia beamed with excitement, deftly trimmed the wire, and carefully removed the scrap from the clock.

"Okay, what's next?" George asked her.

"The wings?" Hestia replied.

George nodded. "And then you can do the legs, too," he added.

She fastened the linkage to the wings, trimmed the wire, and then put the now-linked Fred onto his legs. George took her place and looked everything over, nodding in satisfaction.

"Great! Now we just add the spring, attach the lever to the movement, and give it a try!"

He looked at Hestia expectantly.

"M—me?" she asked.

George grinned. "That clock's not gonna finish itself," he said.

Hestia exhaled slowly and turned back to the bench. She'd seen her dad assemble enough clocks that she knew what size spring to use to pull the cuckoo back in when he wasn't singing. She pulled one from a little bin of them and carefully maneuvered it into place around the lever. As she carefully pulled it back, Fred disappeared into his house for the first time, and the door closed behind him. She fastened the other end of the spring to a little peg inside the enclosure, putting a little tension on it. Finally, she latched the movement trigger arm onto the now-taut lever, using the spring's resistance to hold the lever still so she could make the connection a little more easily.

She took another breath and let it out slowly, swallowing nervously. The first clock she'd gotten to help finish! Would it work?

"Let's give it a shot," her dad said.

The hands were already on the clock, so Hestia just started turning them. But when she got around to the hour, nothing happened.

"Wha—?" she asked, confused.

"Forgetting something?" her mom asked.

Hestia frowned, and her mom whispered, "Clocks work better when they're wound."

"Ugh," Hestia said, doing a face-palm and shaking her head. She was so excited that she forgot the *most* basic step!

She pulled the chains, winding the cuckoo and the timekeeping mechanisms and moved the hands forward to the next hour.

Fred leapt out of his house with a resounding "cuckoo," making Hestia squeal with glee.

"Way to go, kiddo!" George said, hugging her excitedly.

"Awwk, my name is Fred," Peggy said, imitating a parrot and laughing.

"Mama, he's a cuckoo!" Hestia protested, chuckling.

"Whatever he is, that's some high-quality craftsmanship, hon," George said, rubbing her shoulder affectionately. "We'll have you building your own clocks in no time!"

"It's great that you guys were always so close," Frank said, smiling wistfully.

Hestia frowned. "I'm sorry; I forgot your family was never all that close."

Frank shrugged. "Heaven knows, my mom tried, but she was a busy lawyer with two kids to handle on her own."

Frank sat with his textbooks and homework strewn across the kitchen table. He could see Karen basking in the pool outside and thought how nice it must feel. But Frank was a model student and always put his homework before play time, a trait he probably got from his mom, who at that moment was taking calls in the other room.

"If right triangle ABC has leg lengths 3 and 4, what is the length of the hypotenuse?" he said, reading the last problem aloud. "Oh, that's..."

He scrawled on his paper, did the calculations, and came up with 5.

"Ugh, finally!" he said.

He liked math, and geometry really appealed to him in its practicality, but still, after five days of private school and all of the extracurricular activities—polo, fencing, and swimming—he was ready for some relaxation!

He strapped his homework and his textbook into his book strap and put them on the counter by the door so he'd remember them the next morning and then eagerly padded to his room and changed into swim briefs. He stopped by his mom's office on his way outside.

"Mom?" he asked quietly. "Gonna come join us?"

"I'll be right there," she said, putting her hand over the receiver. "I've just got to finish up on some calls."

Frank pursed his lips and nodded, trying to conceal his disappointment. He stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

"Oh, look, it's the Shrimp!" Karen called.

"Don't call me that, Karen," Frank said, annoyed. "I hate it when you do that."

"What? Call you a shrimp? But you *are* a shrimp, little, tiny Frankie!"

She paddled over and leapt out, shaking off her fur and dousing Frank, who shriveled his nose in distaste.

"Come on, little Frankie-Shrimp! Let's get in the water!" Karen said, trying to pick him up.

"Cut it out, Karen!" Frank growled, jumping back out of reach.

"Aww, but doesn't the scrawny fox want to get in the water?"

"I am *not* scrawny; I'm compact!" Frank retorted, "And I'll get in the water when I want to!"

Karen shook her head. "Nah," she said, "You're getting in now."

With a quick movement, she shoved him, and he fell into the pool. He came up, sputtering.

"You're such a jerk," he grumbled.

"And you're a shrimp," Karen replied, shrugging. "Deal with it. Cannonball!"

Frank barely had time to take a breath before his sister plunged into the pool next to him, showering him in water. Then she paddled off to her swim ring and sprawled in it, leaving him alone.

He swam a few laps and then got out and jumped off the diving board, slicing into the water like a knife and swimming underwater almost the entire length of the pool. He surfaced at the far end, wiped the water from his eyes, and looked back across the pool. A devious idea crossed his mind as he saw Karen with her eyes closed in the swim tube.

He got out and padded quietly over to the chest that held the pool toys, took out a beach ball, and blew it up. Then he took it to the pool and rolled it in the water.

"Hey, Karen," he said, unable to conceal the impishness in his voice as he flicked the wet ball at her.

"Ngh?" she asked as the ball landed on her.

"You little!" she sputtered, scrambling and falling out of the swim tube with a splash.

Frank roared with laughter as the drenched fox climbed back into the swim ring. But he had to duck as she hurled the ball back at him. It bounced and landed on the water close to him. He threw it back at her, and the two of them got a good game in, even if there was the underlying threat of Karen getting off her swim ring and throttling him.

Panting, they both dove in and cooled off and then got out and began to dry off.

The door opened, and Andrea stepped out in her bathing suit.

"Oh, hey, Mom," Frank said, a hint of unease in his voice.

"Hi, kids! I'm sorry it took so long," she apologized as she stepped up to the pool's edge.

"Uh, it's okay," Frank replied. "We were just getting out."

"Oh," Andrea replied. She sighed. "I'm really sorry; another client called, and I *had* to answer."

"We get it, Mom," Karen replied. "You're busy, and we're just kids."

Frank scowled at his sister, but the point had been made.

Andrea looked hurt for a moment, but then she brightened. "How about I make it up to you? Are there any movies coming out that you'd like to see? Would that hold any interest for you?" she asked.

Frank and Karen exchanged crafty glances.

"Well, there *is* a movie we heard about that we want to see," Frank said.

Andrea cocked an eyebrow. "Uh, huh," she said with a suspicious grin. "What's it called?"

"Animal House!" Karen said.

"Kids, you're not old enough—" Andrea began to protest.

"Please, Mom?" Frank pleaded. "I'm 16, and Karen's 17; it's not like we're little kids..."

Andrea pursed her lips and looked at her kids' eager faces.

"Oh, all right," she relented, shaking her head and laughing. "I could use a laugh anyway."

"Thanks, Mom!" Frank and Karen chorused, both wrapping their mom in a big hug.

"She *did* do the best she could, given the circumstances," Hestia laughed, and Frank nodded.

The clock struck midnight. Frank and Hestia looked at each other.

"About that time, huh?" he asked.

Hestia smiled and nodded, and they got off the couch, turned out the lights, and went into the bedroom. After getting into their nightclothes and brushing their teeth, they crawled into bed with Frank's arm wrapped protectively around Hestia the same way they'd slept every night for many years.

There was an abrupt, urgent knock at the door, and Frank stirred. Glancing over at the alarm clock, it read 2:30 AM.

"Who on earth would be knocking at this time of night?" he murmured, slipping out of bed as quietly as he could and hurrying to the door before the incessant knocking woke Hestia, too.