

1 The Gift

A decade of wealth came to a screeching halt.

Moving his wife away from everyone who knew her was a kind gesture on her husband, Mike's, part. No one in the town of Hutchings knew them, and that was why Mike chose that town. Mrs. Lemere's anger over her fall from richdom obliterated everything else in her life. She was devastated. A ladies' reading group had uninvited Vivian back when they heard the news of the Lemere estate sale and discovered their financial predicament. Rumors were flying around town of Mike being sent to jail. Although untrue, it hurt.

The Hilddale Equestrian club canceled the Lemere's membership with a short letter about dues. Mike and Vivian visited the admissions officer at their children's private school to discuss a payment plan and were soundly rebuffed.

Mike knew that was the last straw for Vivian; he had to get her out of Hilddale before she imploded. Vivian's humiliation over their financial situation was causing her to drink and making things worse.

The house was empty, and the car was packed.

"You might want to use this for personal items," Mike Lemere encouraged his daughter. He gave his eldest child, Porsha, a high-quality black leather fanny pack. "It's made of Elk. I bought it in Alaska. I figured a fifteen-year-old responsible girl, like you, would have important things to put in it."

Most people would think it was just a nice hip bag/ fanny pack, but it was so much more to Porsha. It would always be the thoughtful gift she remembered because it had been accompanied by a lovely compliment from her smiling dad. Her arms went around her father's neck for a tender hug. She would never forget that moment. With everything that disappeared around her—the gift from Mike felt like a lotto win.

"When were you in Alaska, Dad?"

"A long time ago, honey," he said. "You'll learn that you do crazy things for love. Remind me, and I'll tell you about it sometime."

"Hmm, okay." She smiled sweetly at the man whose soft brown eyes, speckled with flecks of green, mirrored her own. She wasn't much for conversations about love. Porsha had made her own mind up about the confusing subject a long time ago. As crazy as the things were that her father claimed he had done—she truly wasn't interested—there was no love radiating from her parents during that move.

"What are you doing, Mike?" bellowed Vivian when she witnessed her husband giving Porsha a gift. The cutesy display sickened Vivian.

The pained expression on her mother's face alerted Porsha. If she was going to keep the bag, she needed to be more discreet. With all the family had given up, Porsha suspected her mother was jealous that Mike even *had* a new bag to give; he must have hidden it from her. Porsha played around with the different ways she could wear the pack. She was tickled to be able

to keep her personal and important things discretely tucked in the bag. The fact she could wear it on top of, or under, a shirt was a plus. On her five-foot-seven lean, muscular frame, it lay almost flat and unnoticeable against her skin, like a big envelope.

What should go in the leather hiding place was an easy decision. Her diary with the broken lock was the first item to find a home in the Elk bag. The distressed journal contained her secrets from the time she was five and first began writing in it.

Perched on the rock steps of the estate home, she tucked her long, silky pecan-colored hair behind her ears and studied the scribbled writings of her five-year-old self. She remembered the excitement of becoming rich and moving up in the world.

Aunt Bernadine passed away before Porsha was three and left a substantial inheritance to Mike. Without hesitation, he invested all of it in Texas oil wells. Several years later, the wells he bet his dreams on hit black gold which called for a new home and position in society for their family.

No longer would the Lemere family be bottom feeders hunting for scraps.

Their first home wasn't much to look at with its peeling paint, blankets hanging where curtains should be, and obviously patched roof. Mrs. Lemere angrily assumed they would grow old there with their big dreams never materializing, but that was not to be their fate. When the first oil company checks came in, Porsha's parents were thrilled to leave the small, old frame house near the railroad tracks in the middle of Cornwall, Kansas. Any nostalgia about the decrepit starter home was lost on Porsha's parents.

Porsha sighed and glanced around; memorizing the sprawling, brick ranch estate in Chicago that had been her home for the last ten years, then resumed her project. The second item she put in the pouch was a small knife Blade gave her after her second lesson, because she needed something to practice throwing. He carved a 'P' on the wooden handle, gave it to her and returned her sweet hug.

A smile trickled across her lips at the memory of Blade; her friend, riding coach, and mentor. Porsha recalled when her mother had half a dozen Mustang horses delivered. Her dad wasn't interested in livestock, but Vivian insisted, telling him, "Anyone of any consequence should be a skilled horseman or horsewoman."

Everyone in town knew Blade Stevens didn't need the money. Unlike his siblings, he didn't fish, hunt, or play cards, which left riding horses. When Blade heard, through his accountant, that the Lemere family was looking for a riding instructor—he wasted no time pursuing the position. He appeared at their home several days per week to instruct Nate, Bond, and Porsha in the art of western style horseback riding. The children knew Blade loved horses, but they also knew he loved *them*; he barely tolerated their parents.

"Mr. Blade," Porsha said on the first day, "your name is different, but I like it."

He responded, "Thank you. My daddy gave me my name after he taught me to use a blade."

To illustrate his words to her, he commanded, "Porsha, watch this." In the blink of an eye, he pulled a knife from somewhere and threw it. The small skean cut through space toward a ragged piece of rope Blade tossed into the air a nanosecond before wielding his knife. The blade pierced the rope then stabbed into the barn wall.

She was amazed. "You know magic, Mr. Blade! I wish I could do that," she confessed.

Blade was delighted with Porsha's response and told her, "It's not magic, dear. If you can keep it a secret, I can teach you to be strong and accurate with a knife."

"I can keep a secret," she promised.

Blade began teaching her the principles of knife throwing right then. The thirty minutes every other day, when Porsha could sneak to the barn undetected became precious to them both.

He briefly spoke of his young student to his wife and son who did not share his enthusiasm for the sport. On many occasions, Blade tried to lure his heir into throwing knives, but there was no fascination for the young Stevens boy.

Out of concern for her well-being, Blade patiently taught her knife safety and throwing accuracy with different blade lengths. He pretended threatening scenarios then imparted to the fascinated child all the knife defense moves he knew. Porsha loved it and soaked it up like a sponge.

“Are we ready?” Mike bellowed from the driver’s seat, bringing Porsha back to the present.

“Coming, Dad!” she shouted back. With the two mementos in the fanny pack, she wove the leather strap through the belt loops on her jeans then covered it with her loose hoodie. She psyched herself up for the seven-hour drive across Kansas to their new life—the trip none of them wanted to take.

She was as ready as she could be to move to the new town of Hutchings; exhilarated, petrified, and mourning.

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