

Heritage Season

initiated by
Melanie Penman

Completed by an automated AI system

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novella are either products of the AI system's creativity or are used fictitiously.

HERITAGE SEASON

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Everything that follows was planned, drafted, and refined by an automated AI system, based on a short input.

Heritage Season

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Chapter 1

My voice echoes in the empty condo as I wrap up what should be my last morning standup as team lead. ‘I’ll be offline during the move today, but you can reach me by phone if anything critical comes up.’ The familiar faces in their Zoom boxes nod, already distracted by their next meetings. Nobody mentions my departure directly—we did the awkward virtual goodbye happy hour last week.

The moving truck’s engine idles outside my window, sending vibrations through the bare floors. I’ve timed this perfectly: close the laptop at 9:15, hand over the keys by 9:30, follow the truck west before rush hour hits the turnpike. One last checklist, executed with the same precision I used to bring to sprint planning.

Two hours later, I’m trailing the truck down a rutted driveway, my car’s suspension protesting each pothole. The real estate photos didn’t capture how the farmhouse lists slightly to one side, or how the barn’s roof sags in the middle like a tired horse. Randy, my

agent, meets me with a smile that's more grimace than greeting. 'Previous owners left it a bit rough,' he says, watching the movers navigate my IKEA boxes through the sunroom's warped door frame. 'But the bones are good.'

The bones might be good, but the flesh is rotting. Each step of our property tour reveals new problems: gutters hanging like broken arms, windowsills soft with decay, ancient wiring that makes Randy nervously mention the fire department's response time. The greenhouse glass is more broken than whole, and the fields—*my* fields now—are a tangle of winter-dead weeds and rusting equipment parts. My carefully researched renovation budget feels increasingly naive.

Standing in what was once my grandmother's flower garden, I try to imagine the photographs I've seen of this place in its prime. Somewhere under the frost-bleached stalks and creeping multiflora rose, her beloved perennials might still survive. A flash of silver movement catches my eye—something darting between the barn's weathered boards—but when I turn to look, there's only shadow.

The silver movement resolves itself into a cat, materializing like mercury from between the barn boards only to vanish again as a truck pulls into the driveway. The vehicle is aggressively clean for a farming commu-

nity, 'Penn State Extension' emblazoned on its door. A man unfolds himself from the driver's seat, all pressed khakis and carefully rolled sleeves, clipboard in hand.

'Kurt Deitrick,' he announces, striding over with the confidence of someone used to having his opinions respected. 'Agricultural extension agent. Thought I'd stop by, help the new hobby farmer get oriented.' His smile doesn't quite reach his eyes as they sweep over my city-appropriate boots and jacket.

I force myself to smile back, though my jaw tightens at 'hobby farmer.' 'Lien Nguyen-Miller. I've actually been reviewing the extension office's soil management guides-'

'Let's start with the basics,' he interrupts, flipping through his clipboard. 'Your soil tests show severe depletion. You'll want to begin with a conventional NPK treatment before attempting any planting. I can recommend some suppliers-'

'Actually,' I pull up my farm planning spreadsheet on my phone, 'I'm looking at biological soil amendments and cover cropping. My grandmother had success with organic methods-'

Kurt's laugh cuts me off. 'Margaret Miller's methods were... quaint for their time. But modern farming requires modern solutions.' He gestures at the overgrown fields. 'This isn't a garden club project.'

Something flashes in my peripheral vision—the silver cat, watching us from beneath a rusted harrow. Its steady gaze feels like validation as I straighten my spine. ‘I’ve analyzed the soil microbiome data and projected regeneration timelines using-’

‘Listen,’ Kurt sighs, ‘I know you tech folks love your data. But real farming happens in the dirt, not spreadsheets.’ He hands me a stack of glossy pamphlets. ‘Start with these beginner guides. Call my office when you’re ready to discuss serious agriculture.’

As his truck disappears down the driveway, I notice the cat has emerged fully into view. It sits precisely where Kurt stood, methodically washing its paw as if cleaning away his presence. Despite everything, I have to smile.

The movers left hours ago, but my laptop’s glow is the only light in the sunroom. I’m trying to focus on my product team’s sprint review while unpacking enough to find my toothbrush. ‘Can you walk us through the API documentation?’ someone asks, and I minimize the video window showing my clearly-not-office background.

‘One second,’ I mute myself to move a box that’s blocking my charger access. The ancient outlets in this room weren’t designed for remote work. A glance at my phone shows three missed calls from the internet

installation company.

The meeting drags on as sunset arrives early, the way it does in February. Each time I unmute to speak, I'm increasingly conscious of how my voice echoes in the empty house. The team debates feature priorities while I silently calculate how many boxes I need to unpack before I can sleep.

By the time we finish, full dark has fallen. My phone's flashlight beam catches dust motes as I search for bedding. The sleeping bag is somewhere, probably in one of the boxes helpfully labeled 'Misc.' A floor-board creaks under my feet, and I freeze—not from fear, exactly, but sudden awareness of the farm's aliveness around me.

I should check the barn doors before turning in. The flashlight beam sweeps the yard, catching something that stops me mid-stride. Two eyes reflect back from the barn's shadows, silver-green and unblinking. The cat sits precisely where the entrance to my grandmother's flower garden would have been, as if guarding it.

For a moment, we just look at each other. Then the cat deliberately closes its eyes—not breaking contact, but acknowledging something. When it opens them again, I feel the strangest sense of continuity, like a thread connecting my grandmother's time here to

mine.

The cat vanishes between one breath and the next, but the feeling remains. I stand there longer than I should, letting the cold February air sink into my bones, listening to the unfamiliar creaks and settling sounds of what is, impossibly, now my farm.

Two weeks into farm ownership, and I've already developed a love-hate relationship with my coffee maker. The ancient electrical system can't handle both it and my laptop running simultaneously, which means choosing between caffeine and predawn client meetings. Today, after yet another circuit breaker incident, I finally admit defeat.

Mill Creek Diner sits at the intersection of Route 273 and the old post road, its neon 'OPEN' sign flickering in the late morning fog. Inside, the air smells of coffee and something savory I can't quite identify. A few older men occupy the counter seats, newspapers spread between their coffee cups.

The woman behind the counter looks up as the bell chimes. She's probably in her seventies, with practical short hair and quick, efficient movements. 'Sit anywhere,' she says, then pauses as I approach the

counter. 'Haven't seen you before.'

'I just moved to the old Miller place,' I say, settling onto a vinyl stool. 'Could I get coffee to go? The biggest size you have.'

Her hand stills on the coffee pot. 'Miller place? You're not-' She studies my face. 'Name wouldn't be Nguyen-Miller, would it?'

The way she says it, like she's been waiting for someone to claim it, makes me sit up straighter. 'Yes, I'm Lien. My grandmother was-'

'Margaret Miller, yes.' She sets the coffee pot down, really looking at me now. 'I'm Mai Chen. Your grandmother brought me flowers every Monday for twenty years. Peonies in spring, zinnias in summer, dried arrangements all winter. She knew exactly what would last longest on the tables.'

My throat tightens unexpectedly. 'I didn't know-'

My phone buzzes, the specific pattern that means client emergency. Mai's expression says she has more to share, but I'm already apologizing, grabbing my untouched coffee, and hurrying out to my truck.

The video call connects just as I'm closing the door. 'Sorry, sorry, I'm here,' I say, angling my phone so they can't see I'm in a vehicle. 'What's the API issue?'

The API crisis takes forty-five minutes to resolve,

my coffee going cold beside me. By the time I end the call, the diner's lunch rush is in full swing—no chance of continuing that conversation with Mai Chen now.

The farm's driveway feels marginally less treacherous after two weeks of filling the worst potholes, though my suspension still complains. I'm mentally drafting apologetic emails to my clients when I spot it: a perfectly arranged mouse, placed precisely in the center of the barn's threshold.

I've seen enough of Ghost's hunting prowess to recognize this as intentional. She's been leaving her kills in the far corner of the barn, methodically working through what must be generations of mice. This presentation feels different—a formal offering.

Ghost herself appears in her usual silver flash, settling on a roof beam to observe my reaction. 'Rent payment accepted,' I tell her, using the same professional tone I save for client meetings. Her slow blink feels like a contract being sealed.

The seed storage area is my next target for cleanup, though 'storage' might be generous for the chaos of broken shelving and water-stained boxes. I'm photographing damage for insurance when I notice something odd about the boards behind a collapsed shelf.

It takes careful maneuvering to avoid splinters, but eventually I work the loose boards free. Behind them,

protected by what looks like an old feed bag, I find a leather-bound notebook. The cover is stiff with age, but I recognize my grandmother's handwriting immediately: *Miller Farm Garden Records, 1985-1999*.

The pages are fragile, many stuck together from old water damage. But between the rippled sections, her precise notes remain clear: planting dates, weather patterns, variety selections. She tracked everything—soil temperature, germination rates, which flowers lasted longest at Mai Chen's diner...

Ghost appears beside me as I'm reading, close enough that I can feel her warmth. It's the nearest she's ever come voluntarily. Together, we study a page describing heritage flower varieties that 'handle wet springs better than the new hybrids.'

My phone rings just as I'm starting to decipher a water-warped page about succession planting. The caller ID shows my mother's number, and I briefly consider letting it go to voicemail.

'Have you seen the job listing I sent?' Mom doesn't bother with hello. 'The startup is doing AI for agriculture—you could stay connected to farming without actually...' She trails off, still unable to directly reference what I'm doing.

'I'm not looking for tech jobs right now.' I settle onto an old feed bag, Ghost a silver shadow in my

peripheral vision. ‘The farm needs-’

‘The farm needs more than you can give it,’ Dad’s voice cuts in—they’re on speaker. ‘We saw the property listing photos. Do you know what kind of capital investment-’

‘I’ve run the numbers.’ I trace my grandmother’s handwriting while I talk, drawing strength from her precise documentation. ‘My consulting work covers the mortgage, and once the heritage varieties are established-’

‘Heritage varieties?’ Mom’s voice rises. ‘Lien, you’re throwing away a six-figure career to grow *old-fashioned flowers*?’

I close my eyes, remembering Mai Chen’s story about my grandmother’s Monday deliveries. ‘They’re drought-resistant. Climate-adaptive. There’s a whole market for-’

‘A market that won’t cover your student loans,’ Dad interrupts. ‘Look at your savings, really look. Then call me back.’

After they hang up, I do look. The numbers in my online banking are exactly what I expected—enough to cover either the critical barn repairs *or* the heritage seed stock, but not both.

Ghost appears on the beam above me, precisely where the roof’s structural crack spreads like a light-

ning bolt through the old wood. She's watching me with the same intensity she brings to hunting, as if this decision is a mouse to be stalked.

I open my grandmother's journal again, finding a page where the water damage creates a marbled pattern around her neat columns of data. The varieties she tracked performed better than modern hybrids during wet years, drought years, cold years...

The heritage seed preservationists' website loads slowly on my phone's spotty connection. Their prices make me wince, but each variety description reads like a survival manual: *Proven flood-resistant. Drought-tolerant. Disease-resistant.*

My cursor hovers over the 'Place Order' button while Ghost prowls the beam above, both of us ignoring the way the crack in the barn roof widens slightly when the wind gusts.

I think about Mai Chen's face when she mentioned my grandmother's flowers. About Kurt Deitrick's dismissal of 'quaint' methods. About the way Ghost chose to show herself only after I mentioned sustainable farming.

The order confirmation email arrives just as another gust rattles the barn's loose boards. I'll have to get creative about stabilizing that roof, but at least I know my seeds will survive whatever weather comes

Heritage Season

through it.

Chapter 2

Three weeks after ordering the heritage seeds, I'm standing in Deitrick Agricultural Supply, trying not to let my voice betray how many YouTube videos I've watched about the tractor I'm attempting to rent. The parts manager—Brad, according to his name tag—keeps talking over me to address my questions to the elderly man browsing feed supplements behind me.

'Like I said, miss, the rental agreement requires proof of operational experience.' Brad's condescending smile doesn't reach his eyes. 'Maybe your father or husband could-'

'I have the insurance documentation and certification from the extension office training course.' I pull up the PDFs on my phone, which Brad studies with exaggerated skepticism. 'And I can demonstrate proper-'

My phone buzzes with the client emergency pattern. Brad's smirk suggests he thinks it's a staged rescue call.

'Tomorrow morning,' I tell him, already calcu-

lating how early I'll need to start consulting work to make up for this delay. 'I'll be back with the full paperwork, and I *will* be renting that tractor.'

The drive home takes longer than usual—every pothole feels like the farm reminding me I need that tractor. When I finally park, Ghost is waiting by the barn door with her latest kill, a mouse that must have been living in the heritage seed storage.

I'm still documenting Brad's microaggressions in my discrimination log when my laptop chimes with the client video call. 'Sorry for the delay on the API documentation,' I begin, but the project manager interrupts.

'We needed that documentation *yesterday*, Lien. The offshore team is-' He stops, squinting at his screen. 'Are you in a barn?'

I adjust my laptop, trying to hide the seed shelves behind me. 'My home office is being renovated. About the API-'

Movement catches my eye: Ghost, stalking something near the newly sprouted heritage seedlings. She's not hunting randomly, I realize, but methodically herding mice away from the most vulnerable plants. The project manager is still talking, but I'm already opening a new spreadsheet, tracking Ghost's patterns with the same precision I once used for code deploy-

ment.

‘Lien? Are you even listening?’

‘Sorry, yes—documenting an organic pest management breakthrough.’ The words slip out before I can stop them. ‘I’ll have the API documentation by end of day.’

After the call ends, I spend an hour mapping Ghost’s hunting territories against my planting zones. She’s created a perfect defensive perimeter around the heritage varieties, adapting her strategy as seedlings emerge. When I note this in my farm records, I find myself using the same formatting I developed for tracking code dependencies.

The Historic Station Market lives up to its name—housed in a renovated 1890s train depot, with soaring wooden beams and sunlight streaming through restored Victorian windows. I’m arranging my modest selection of early spring flowers when Elena Flores-Mendoza arrives, her truck backing into the prime corner spot with practiced ease.

Her display transforms the space: cascading ranunculus in perfectly graduated colors, forced bulbs blooming exactly on schedule, even her buckets coordinated in tasteful copper tones. My mason jars and grandmother’s vintage milk bottles suddenly feel painfully amateur.

‘First market?’ Elena asks, not unkindly, as she adjusts a spectacular hellebore arrangement. Her movements are precise, each stem finding its perfect angle.

‘That obvious?’ I try to mirror her technique with my own hellebores, but they stubbornly refuse to cooperate.

‘We all start somewhere.’ She pauses, studying my flowers with professional interest. ‘Those are unusual varieties—that purple especially.’

Before I can respond, an elderly woman approaches my table, ignoring Elena’s showstopping display. ‘Is that *Grandmother’s Bonnet* larkspur?’ Her fingers trace the air above the delicate purple blooms. ‘My mother grew these, but I haven’t seen them since...’ She trails off, lost in memory.

‘Yes!’ I pull out my grandmother’s journal, carefully turning to a less water-damaged page. ‘They’re an heirloom variety that—’

‘That Margaret Miller preserved.’ The woman’s eyes sharpen. ‘You’re her granddaughter? The one Mai Chen mentioned?’

I notice Elena listening while pretending to adjust her displays. ‘Yes, I’m trying to restore her growing methods—’

‘Come to the diner after market,’ the woman interrupts. ‘There are some things you should know about

those methods.’

By the time I pack up my mostly-empty buckets (Elena’s corner spot is still doing brisk business), the diner’s parking lot is full. Mai Chen greets me with fresh coffee and a knowing smile, gesturing to a booth where my morning customer sits with another older farmer.

‘Ruth Kerschner,’ the woman introduces herself properly. ‘And this is Jim Whitaker—he farmed next to your grandmother for thirty years.’

‘Until she switched to just the demonstration gardens,’ Jim adds, something careful in his tone. ‘Shame about that last flood-’

‘Jim,’ Ruth cuts him off with a sharp look. ‘Let’s start with the good parts. Tell her about Margaret’s three-field rotation system.’

As they talk, I fill pages with notes: companion planting techniques I’d never find in modern guides, weather patterns tracked across decades, subtle signs for predicting late frosts. But every time the conversation approaches *why* my grandmother stopped farming, someone changes the subject.

Mai refills our coffee with suspicious frequency, each visit adding another detail: ‘Margaret always planted extra peonies near the road so passing children could pick them...’ or ‘She knew which flowers

would press best for wedding bibles...?’

It’s Ghost who finally ends the impromptu history lesson, announcing herself with an urgent meow at my truck window. I’ve never heard her voice before, and the sound sends me rushing back to the farm, where I find three mice cornered near the heritage seedlings.

After dispatching the intruders, Ghost supervises as I add Ruth and Jim’s knowledge to my growing database, her tail twitching at each mention of flood patterns. The gaps in their story feel significant, but for now, I focus on what they *did* share—like my grandmother, Ghost seems to believe in teaching through demonstration rather than explanation.

By mid-May, my grandmother’s heritage varieties are thriving in ways that surprise even Ghost, who’s taken to sunbathing among the larkspur when she’s not on rodent patrol. The morning light through the greenhouse panels turns everything golden, making even the most practical crops look like they belong in a painting.

I’m checking the temperature controls before my 9am client presentation when I notice something wrong with the ventilation system. The panels that

should be automatically opening aren't responding, and the temperature is climbing dangerously fast. My phone buzzes—the Singapore team waiting to start the meeting.

'Just five minutes,' I text, already climbing the rickety greenhouse ladder. The ancient gears are stuck, probably from yesterday's rain. My laptop chimes with the meeting notification as I'm manually forcing the panels open, sweat dripping onto my grandmother's carefully labeled seed trays below.

Twenty minutes later, my hands still shaking from adrenaline and heat, I open my laptop to find three increasingly terse emails from the project manager. The last one ends with: *We need to discuss your commitment to this project.*

Ghost appears at my elbow with a mouse—her version of moral support—as I draft my response. Before I can send it, Kurt Deitrick's truck pulls up, right on time for our grant review meeting.

'Your temperature monitoring setup is interesting,' he says instead of hello, eyeing my cobbled-together sensor system. 'Though traditional manual vents would be more reliable.'

'The automatic system works fine when it's not stuck,' I counter, pulling up my carefully documented efficiency data. 'About the grant application-'

A familiar truck catches my eye through the greenhouse panels—Elena’s, pulling up to Harvest House, the farm-to-table restaurant that rejected my wholesale application last month. Through the rippled glass, I watch her unloading perfect bouquets with practiced efficiency.

‘Their chef is very particular about suppliers,’ Kurt comments, following my gaze. ‘They usually require at least two seasons of consistent production before-’

‘I have the production numbers right here,’ I interrupt, turning back to my laptop. ‘And three generations of growing records, if you count my grandmother’s journals.’

Kurt’s expression softens slightly. ‘Your grandmother was an excellent record-keeper. But modern grant committees need to see-’

My phone buzzes again: *Final warning regarding missed meetings*. Through the greenhouse glass, Elena’s truck disappears around the corner, leaving me with wilting seedlings, a skeptical Kurt, and the sinking feeling that I’m trying to balance two worlds that are increasingly determined to collide.

The next Saturday market arrives with a heat wave that has everyone’s flowers wilting faster than usual. I’m misting my grandmother’s heat-resistant varieties—still fresh despite the temperature—when I hear

snickering from the booth behind me.

‘Real farmers don’t need spray bottles,’ Dave Mitchell announces to his son, loud enough to carry. ‘These girl farmers treating their plants like house pets...’

I keep misting, pretending not to hear, but I notice Elena’s hands pause over her own spray bottle. Our eyes meet briefly across the aisle. Her slight eye roll matches my suppressed sigh perfectly.

Dave’s next comment is even louder: ‘Back in my day, women stuck to garden clubs-’

‘Your day must have been before the Dust Bowl,’ Elena interrupts, her voice carrying clearly. ‘When *real* farmers learned about moisture management the hard way.’ She demonstrates her misting technique with elegant precision, each movement a masterclass in efficiency.

I find myself mirroring her rhythm, our synchronized misting drawing appreciative nods from customers. Dave’s muttering fades into background noise as Elena catches my eye again, this time with the ghost of a smile.

Back home that evening, I’m documenting the day’s sales when Ghost appears with an offering—the biggest rat I’ve seen yet. ‘Quite the harvest,’ I tell her, adding another data point to my pest management

spreadsheet. The heritage flowers are thriving, their colors intensified by the golden hour light. I grab my phone to capture the moment.

Ghost prowls the rows as I frame the shot, her silver coat a perfect contrast to the purple larkspur. Three generations of careful breeding show in every petal—my grandmother’s selections, my modern growing techniques, Ghost’s organic pest control. I’m adding filters when my phone buzzes twice.

The first notification is a weather alert: *Severe storm system developing. Potential for extreme wind and rain next week.*

The second is an email from my remaining tech client: *Given your continued unavailability... regret to inform you... contract terminated effective immediately.*

I should feel panicked. Instead, I find myself taking another photo as Ghost poses regally between rows of thriving heritage stock. My grandmother’s journal mentioned how these varieties survived the drought of ‘64. They’ll survive whatever next week brings.

Looking at the final image—Ghost’s confident pose, the flowers my grandmother saved through countless seasons, the rich soil that’s finally coming back to life—I realize I’m not just documenting my work anymore. I’m recording the moment I chose to be a

in. Melanie Penman

farmer, whatever comes next.

Heritage Season

Chapter 3

The weather alert comes at 2:47 AM. I'm already awake, watching the radar like I have been since sunset, Ghost unusually still beside me on the sunroom's worn windowseat. The National Weather Service's language is clinical: *Derecho conditions developing. Severe straight-line winds expected. Take immediate shelter.*

By 3:15, the wind sounds wrong—not like the usual summer storms that Ghost and I have gotten used to, but something deeper, almost mechanical. The barn's weather vane, installed by my grandmother in '82 according to her journals, spins so fast it's just a blur in my phone's flashlight beam.

'Time to move,' I tell Ghost, but she's already heading for the barn. It's our strongest structure, despite the crack in the north wall that I still haven't been able to afford fixing. The heritage seeds are stored there, along with everything I've managed to save from my grandmother's garden. Ghost leads the way as if she's done this before, though this is the worst storm we've seen since I bought the farm.

The wind tries to rip the barn door from my hands. Inside, the old timbers creak in ways I've never heard before. Ghost takes up her usual position on the highest beam, but even she seems uncertain, her ears flicking at each new sound. I'm documenting everything on my phone—wind direction, time stamps, pressure changes from my cobbled-together monitoring system—when the first support beam splinters.

The crack sounds like a gunshot. Ghost is suddenly beside me, all pretense of feline independence abandoned. The north wall groans—that same wall I've been worried about since February. Through gaps in the boards, I see debris flying past like horizontal rain.

'Root cellar,' I decide, just as the wall begins to buckle. Ghost doesn't even protest being scooped up. We make it down the cellar steps as something massive—probably the Anderson's trampoline—slams into where we were standing.

The root cellar smells like my grandmother's journals—that mix of damp earth and old paper that I've come to associate with her farming records. As the storm rages overhead, my flashlight beam catches a familiar handwriting on pages stuck behind a loose stone: *June 1992—Second derecho this decade. Traditional wind breaks failing. Testing new hybrid system...*

Ghost paces the cellar's perimeter, agitated by the

thunder but unwilling to stray far from me. I keep reading, trying to focus on my grandmother's neat script instead of the sounds of my farm being torn apart above us. The journal's next entry is mostly water-damaged, but one line stands out clearly: *Sometimes the only way forward is through.*

The storm rages for hours. I read my grandmother's journals by flashlight until the batteries start to fade, Ghost alternating between pacing and pressing against my legs. The cellar's old radio picks up emergency broadcasts between bursts of static: *Multiple touchdowns... Emergency services overwhelmed... Shelter in place...*

Around 5 AM, the roaring finally begins to fade. Ghost's ears prick up first, then she's halfway up the stairs before I can stop her. The cellar door feels heavier than usual—debris, probably. When I finally shoulder it open, the pre-dawn light reveals a landscape I barely recognize.

My hands shake as I document everything, agricultural extension training kicking in on autopilot. The greenhouse is just... gone. The heritage flower beds are underwater. The barn's north wall has partially collapsed, and something that might be the Miller's grain silo is lying across my access road.

I'm trying to photograph the flood line on the

barn when I hear an engine struggling up the back field road. Elena's truck appears through the mist, mud up to its wheel wells. She jumps out before it's fully stopped, her usual composed demeanor cracked.

'Have you seen any sheep?' she calls, then stops short at the sight of my barn. 'God, Lien. Your wall...'

'How many are missing?' I ask, already reaching for my boots. Our usual market rivalry seems absurd in the gray dawn light.

'Four. The storm took out the east fence...' She pauses, looking past me toward town. The valley is strangely quiet except for our sector. No sirens. No emergency vehicles.

'They're not coming, are they?' I say, following her gaze. The road into town looks clear—meaning the worst damage is concentrated here, in our forgotten corner of the valley.

'They'll be dealing with population centers first.' Elena's voice is grim. She eyes the rising water threatening my heritage beds, then looks back at her truck. 'I have sandbags. Not enough, but...'

'I have pump equipment from the greenhouse setup,' I offer. 'Assuming we can find it in...' I gesture at the debris field that used to be my carefully planned market garden.

Ghost emerges from checking her territory, fur

bristling at the unfamiliar scents of flood and livestock. A distant bleating catches her attention—and ours.

‘That’s Sarah’s voice,’ Elena says, already moving. ‘My lead ewe.’

‘I know a few things about tracking animals,’ I say, nodding toward Ghost. Elena’s slight smile acknowledges the olive branch.

‘I know a few things about flood management,’ she counters, hefting the sandbags.

The sun breaks through as we start walking, illuminating the full scope of what we’re facing. The storm has erased the careful boundaries between our farms, leaving us with a shared disaster that neither of us can handle alone.

We find Sarah and the other ewes huddled in what used to be my cut-flower field, the heritage zinnias trampled but possibly salvageable. Elena works quickly with practiced movements, checking each sheep for injuries while I document the flood’s progression with my phone’s camera.

‘The water’s still rising,’ I note, watching my grandmother’s careful drainage system fail under the unprecedented flow. ‘We have maybe an hour before it reaches the heritage beds.’

‘Then we work fast.’ Elena’s tone is clipped but not

unkind. ‘Help me get them to higher ground, then we’ll see what we can save from your plantings.’

Ghost appears with a drowned field mouse, dropping it pointedly between us before vanishing into the debris field. Where she’d normally stay hidden during daylight hours, now she’s hunting in plain sight, adapting to the crisis in her own way.

We work in grim silence, moving sheep and salvaging plants as the water inches higher. Elena knows exactly how to lift heritage specimens without damaging their root systems, though she tries to hide her expertise. I pretend not to notice, just as she pretends not to notice my careful documentation of her technique.

‘Your grandmother taught me about root preservation,’ she finally admits, cradling a rare larkspur variety. ‘I was twelve, helping my mother with flower deliveries. She showed us how to transplant without shock.’

The admission hangs between us as we race the rising water. Ghost makes another visible pass, this time herding mice away from the remaining dry seed storage. Like her, we’re all adapting to new priorities. I find myself sharing my grandmother’s journal entries about the ‘92 derecho, while Elena describes her family’s traditional flood management techniques.

By mid-morning, we've saved what we can—a truck bed full of heritage plants, three boxes of viable seeds, and four muddy but unharmed sheep. The flood waters have breached the last drainage ditch, merging our properties into one disaster zone. Ghost surveys it all from atop Elena's truck, unusually visible as if keeping watch while we focus on survival.

'What now?' I ask, though we both know emergency services won't reach us anytime soon.

Elena studies the water's flow pattern, her expression shifting from competitor to collaborator. 'Now we figure out how to save what's left. Together.'

Day four after the derecho, and I'm starting to forget what dry socks feel like. The Mill Creek Diner's parking lot is full—mostly mud-covered trucks and emergency vehicles. Inside, every surface is covered with maps and laptops, the usual breakfast crowd replaced by exhausted farmers and officials.

Mai works the room with coffee and efficiency, somehow maintaining normal breakfast service at the counter while coordinating our crisis response from the back tables. She tops off my cup without asking, her free hand squeezing my shoulder briefly.

‘The contamination is our primary concern,’ the environmental health inspector says, spreading out test results next to my half-eaten toast. ‘The floodwater’s picked up agricultural chemicals from upstream. Both your properties are in the highest risk zone.’

Elena leans forward, her arm brushing mine as she studies the map. We’ve barely slept since the storm, taking turns monitoring water levels and rescuing what we can. Her presence beside me feels oddly natural now, like we’ve been working together for years instead of days.

The diner’s bell chimes and Kurt strides in, tablet in hand, looking as tired as the rest of us. ‘You need to see this,’ he says, pulling up satellite imagery. The storm’s path shows clearly—a precise swath of destruction cutting through our valley sector. Our farms sit dead center.

‘Traditional flood management assumes standard drainage patterns,’ Kurt admits, his usual certainty cracking. ‘But this... this is creating its own weather system. The temperature differential is maintaining the water flow in ways we’ve never seen.’

I think of my grandmother’s water-damaged journal entries about hybrid management systems. Elena must notice something in my expression, because she shifts slightly closer, her coffee cup clinking against

mine.

‘So what are our options?’ Elena asks, her voice steady despite the dark circles under her eyes. The inspector and Kurt exchange glances that make my stomach clench.

‘Your options,’ Kurt says carefully, ‘are limited by how the water’s moving. We’re seeing unprecedented soil migration patterns.’

A reporter from the local paper appears beside our table, notebook already open. ‘Can you estimate the crop loss percentage?’ she asks, pen hovering expectantly.

The question hits harder than it should. I close my eyes, seeing again the careful rows of heritage plantings disappearing under contaminated water. But something else surfaces too—a memory of my grandmother’s voice from an old video, explaining her method of staging plantings at different elevations *specifically* for flood years.

‘The north field,’ I say suddenly, cutting off Kurt’s careful explanation of damage assessment protocols. ‘My grandmother’s records showed she always kept certain varieties on the higher ground, even though it was harder to irrigate. She called it her flood insurance.’

Mai, passing with the coffee pot, stops abruptly.

‘Wait here,’ she says, disappearing into the back room. She returns with a worn Bible, carefully opening it to reveal pressed flowers between the pages.

‘Your grandmother gave me these,’ she explains, gently lifting a perfectly preserved larkspur. ‘Every season, she would press the best specimens. She said someday someone might need to remember what grew here, and how.’

Elena leans in, her shoulder warm against mine as we examine the dried flowers. ‘These are all flood-resistant varieties,’ she says softly. ‘Look at the stem structure.’

The reporter is scribbling frantically, but I barely notice. Each page of Mai’s Bible holds another piece of my grandmother’s agricultural knowledge, carefully preserved between verses.

‘There’s something else,’ Kurt interrupts, zooming in on his satellite image. ‘The flood waters from both your properties have merged. The contamination is creating a shared watershed. If we don’t act fast, you’ll both lose your topsoil.’

Elena and I exchange glances. We’ve moved past competition into survival mode, but this makes it official—our farms are now literally connected by crisis.

‘Show me the water flow pattern again,’ Elena says, pulling my grandmother’s pressed flowers closer. ‘If

she was planning for floods back then...'

'We could try terracing,' Elena suggests, tracing water patterns on Kurt's tablet. 'My father used similar techniques in Michoacán.'

'The slope's wrong for traditional terracing,' Kurt starts, but I'm barely listening. The pressed larkspur in Mai's Bible has triggered something—a memory of my grandmother's voice on an old VHS tape, explaining her planting strategy to a garden club tour.

'The Bible,' I say suddenly. 'Mai, are there any notes with these flowers? My grandmother always labeled everything.'

Mai carefully turns a page, revealing neat handwriting beneath each specimen. 'She documented soil conditions, planting depth, even weather patterns,' she confirms. 'Said it was important to record what survived and why.'

Elena shifts closer, her finger hovering over a date. 'Look—this one's from after the '92 flood. The stem structure's completely different from the earlier specimens.'

'She was selecting for flood resistance,' I realize. 'Each generation slightly hardier than the last.'

The reporter's pen scratches frantically. 'So these aren't just preserved flowers—they're a climate adaptation record?'

Kurt leans in, professional skepticism warring with obvious interest. ‘The timing matches our satellite data. These elevation changes she noted—they’re exactly where we’re seeing the worst erosion now.’

‘There’s more,’ Mai says, disappearing into the diner’s office. She returns with a cardboard box, carefully lifting out seed packets labeled in my grandmother’s handwriting. ‘She brought these the last time she delivered flowers. Said to keep them safe, that someday the valley would need them.’

Elena’s hand finds mine under the table as we examine the seeds. Each packet contains detailed notes about flood tolerance, soil requirements, and elevation preferences. My grandmother had been preparing for this, even if she didn’t know exactly what ‘this’ would be.

‘The water’s still rising,’ Kurt reminds us, zooming out on his tablet. ‘These historical records are fascinating, but we need immediate action. Your properties...’ He pauses, adjusting the image. ‘The contamination is creating a single watershed. You’re essentially farming the same land now.’

I feel Elena’s fingers tighten slightly against mine. Four days ago, we were competitors. Now our farms are literally merging, the flood waters erasing boundaries that suddenly seem arbitrary.

‘Show me those elevation notes again,’ Elena says, pulling the Bible closer with her free hand. ‘If your grandmother was right about the flood patterns...’

Two weeks after the diner meeting, I’m kneeling in the newly drained north field when I hear the distinctive sound of my father’s Tesla navigating the rutted driveway. My hands freeze in the soil—they hadn’t said they were coming, but I should have expected it after dodging their calls all week.

Elena looks up from where she’s marking erosion patterns. ‘Your parents?’ she asks quietly. I nod, wiping mud on my already-filthy jeans. We’ve spent days implementing my grandmother’s flood management techniques, and the results are starting to show—but all they’ll see is the devastation.

‘Lien.’ My mother’s voice carries across the field, sharp with concern. ‘What happened to your *phone*? We’ve been trying to-’ She stops abruptly as Mrs. Schmidt’s ancient pickup rattles up behind their Tesla, followed by three more vehicles.

I watch my parents take in the scene: Mrs. Schmidt and the Lutheran ladies carefully unloading boxes of pressed flowers in glass frames, Mr. Chen

from the historical society spreading out yellowed papers on a folding table, Kurt setting up his laptop for what looks suspiciously like a presentation.

‘Your grandmother gave us these every Easter,’ Mrs. Schmidt explains, not waiting for introductions as she hands me a frame containing perfectly preserved bachelor buttons. ‘She always said certain varieties were insurance against bad years. We didn’t understand then, but...’

My mother steps closer, her city shoes sinking slightly in the mud. I see her reading the careful notes beneath each flower—dates, conditions, survival rates. Her hand trembles slightly as she touches the glass.

‘The historical society has her rainfall records going back thirty years,’ Mr. Chen adds, gesturing to his papers. ‘She was tracking flood patterns before we had satellite data. Look at these elevation maps.’

Kurt clears his throat. ‘Which is why,’ he says, turning his laptop so my father can see the screen, ‘we’re proposing a grant combining Mrs. Miller’s historical observations with current climate modeling. The USDA is particularly interested in her hybrid approach to flood management.’

Elena appears at my elbow with more of my grandmother’s pressed flowers, her arm brushing mine as she helps arrange them chronologically. My

mother's eyes track the contact, but her expression has shifted from rescue-mission determination to something more complex.

'You're implementing her methods?' my father asks, his tech-industry skepticism warring with obvious interest in Kurt's data visualizations.

'We all are,' Elena says simply, gesturing to where her father's tractor is already starting work on the next field section. 'Her records are proving more accurate than our modern predictions.'

My father has moved from skepticism to full data-analysis mode, peppering Kurt with questions about satellite imagery and soil composition. My mother still stands near the flower displays, one hand absently touching frame after frame.

'Here,' Elena murmurs, passing me another set of pressed flowers. 'These match the north field plantings.' Our fingers brush as we arrange them, falling into the same wordless coordination we've developed over weeks of crisis management.

Mai appears with coffee in actual mugs—a luxury after weeks of paper cups—and I catch her hiding a smile as she watches Elena and me work. She's brought her Bible too, carefully adding its preserved specimens to our timeline.

'Your grandmother always said flowers tell stories

if you know how to read them,' Mai tells my mother, who's drawn closer to our impromptu exhibition. 'Look how the root structures changed over time—she was breeding for resilience before we understood why we'd need it.'

A flash of silver catches my eye—Ghost, emerging from the barn with unusual boldness. She pauses, surveying our gathered crowd with obvious judgment, then sets off toward the higher ground with deliberate steps.

'That cat,' Mai says suddenly. 'Your grandmother's last cat used to patrol that same path. She said it was the dry line—no matter how bad the flooding, that ridge stayed safe.'

Elena's already moving, following Ghost's path. I fall into step beside her, our shoulders brushing. The rest of the group trails behind, my father still talking drainage patterns with Kurt.

Ghost stops at a slight rise, sitting primly beside a tangle of green shoots pushing through the mud. Elena drops to her knees, gently brushing aside debris.

'*Delphinium*,' she breathes. '*Consolida regalis*—the old variety your grandmother specialized in. The roots must have held despite the flood.'

My mother makes a soft sound behind me. I turn to find her watching not the flowers, but me—taking

in my mud-stained clothes, my easy synchronization with Elena, the way the community has gathered around us.

‘She always said real flowers survive,’ Mai says quietly. ‘Not the pampered ones, but the ones that learn to bend with storms and come back stronger.’

I meet my mother’s eyes, seeing something shift in her expression as she looks between the heritage flowers, the gathered community, and her daughter—finally recognizing that I haven’t just survived here, I’ve taken root.

Heritage Season

Chapter 4

The first real cold snap hits in late October, turning morning dew to frost that crunches under my boots. Elena and I have settled into an efficient rhythm these past months, trading labor and equipment like farmers have always done—though I suspect traditional farmers don't get quite so distracted watching their neighbors handle power tools.

Today we're tackling her greenhouse, replacing panels damaged during the derecho. The morning sun catches in her dark hair as she measures and marks, calling measurements that I record in my waterproof notebook. Ghost observes from a safe distance, having followed me here as she increasingly does when I work at Elena's farm.

'Hold this end?' Elena asks, positioning a polycarbonate panel. I step closer, hyper-aware of our proximity as we maneuver the unwieldy material. Her hands are strong and sure, callused in different places than mine from years of flower work. When our fingers brush during a particularly tricky angle, I nearly

drop my end.

The panel slips slightly, forcing us closer as we stabilize it. I catch a hint of the rosemary soap she uses, mixed with the sharp scent of frost-nipped marigolds from her work jacket. For a moment, neither of us moves.

A tremendous clattering breaks the spell as Ghost bursts through the greenhouse door, dragging what has to be the biggest rat I've ever seen. She deposits her prize directly between us, looking enormously pleased with herself.

Elena's startled laugh brushes warm against my ear before she steps back. 'Your cat has *interesting* timing,' she says, but her eyes linger on mine for a moment longer than necessary.

We spend another hour securing panels, carefully not mentioning the moment Ghost interrupted. By late afternoon, my stomach's growling loud enough that Elena suggests dinner at the diner. 'Mai's making *phở*,' she says casually, though we both know it's only on the secret menu.

The diner's nearly empty when we arrive, that quiet period between the farmers' early dinner and the night shift's coffee run. Mai takes one look at our mud-streaked clothes and ghost-white faces from the cold, and disappears into the kitchen without taking

our order.

‘Your grandmother used to come in looking just like that,’ she calls over her shoulder. ‘Especially during her experimental years, when she was helping us figure out which Asian vegetables would survive here.’ She returns with two steaming bowls and slides into the booth beside me, her eyes tracking the way Elena automatically passes me the chili sauce without being asked.

‘Did you know,’ Mai continues, ‘that Margaret was the one who suggested I grow Vietnamese herbs behind the diner? The health inspector tried to shut it down—said it wasn’t *traditional*.’ She snorts. ‘Your grandmother marched right in with soil samples and growth charts, showed him how the drainage here matched conditions in the Mekong Delta.’

Elena’s knee brushes mine under the table. ‘That sounds like the Margaret Miller I keep hearing about. Probably had three different contingency plans for when the inspector said no.’

‘Four,’ Mai corrects, smiling. ‘She’d already started a test plot at her farm, just in case. Said sometimes you have to prove things work before people believe they’re possible.’ Her gaze moves meaningfully between Elena and me.

My phone buzzes—the building inspector’s report

I've been dreading. One look at my face and Elena's reaching for it, our fingers tangling briefly as I pass it over.

'*Structural integrity compromised beyond temporary repair*,' she reads. '*Unsafe for winter storage*.' She sets the phone down carefully. 'You can't lose another season's worth of supplies to weather damage.'

'My greenhouse has space,' she says after a long moment, not quite meeting my eyes. 'The new section we just finished. It's heated, secure...'

Mai busies herself wiping down the already-clean counter, but I catch her small smile.

'That's...' I swallow hard. 'That would mean a lot of early mornings, late nights. Working around each other's schedules.'

'I know.' Elena traces a pattern in the condensation on her water glass. 'But we've gotten pretty good at that, haven't we?'

Through the diner's window, I can see the last sunlight catching on the frost-rimed fields we've rebuilt together. 'Yeah,' I say softly. 'I guess we have.'

The township building's fluorescent lights cast harsh shadows across the packed meeting room. I'm sitting

between Elena and Mai, trying not to fidget with my presentation notes while Kurt sets up his laptop. Three months of data analysis, countless revisions of our proposal, and it all comes down to tonight's vote.

Elena's knee presses against mine under the table, steady and grounding. We've rehearsed this so many times in the greenhouse during evening inventory checks that I could recite it in my sleep, but facing the actual crowd—including several prominent farmers who've already voiced opposition—makes my throat tight.

Kurt clears his throat, and the room gradually quiets. 'As your agricultural extension agent,' he begins, clicking to his first slide, 'I've been tracking recovery patterns since last June's derecho.' His voice carries the careful authority I remember from our first meeting, but there's something different in how he stands now, more open to the room.

The data speaks for itself: satellite images showing the stark contrast between conventional and hybrid farming approaches, soil retention rates, crop survival statistics. When he reaches the slide comparing our properties to neighboring farms, I hear murmuring from the back rows.

'Miller Heritage Farm and Flores Family Flowers demonstrated 47% better soil retention during flood

conditions,' Kurt continues, pointing to a particularly striking graph. 'Their combined use of traditional knowledge and innovative water management-'

'Traditional?' someone interrupts from the back. Harold Weber, whose family's been farming here since the 1800s. 'There's nothing traditional about what they're proposing. A community farmstand? That's direct competition with established markets.'

More voices join in, overlapping: 'They'll undercut prices-' 'Bring in outsiders-' 'Change the character of the valley-'

I feel Elena tense beside me, but before either of us can respond, Kurt zooms in on his data. 'These methods saved topsoil worth thousands of dollars per acre,' he says, voice cutting through the chaos. 'Can we afford to ignore that because it comes from unexpected sources?'

Frank Deitrick—Kurt's uncle and owner of the agricultural supply store—stands up slowly. 'With all due respect to our extension agent,' he says, emphasizing the family connection, 'we're talking about two hobby farmers playing at tradition here. Six months of moderate success doesn't qualify them to reshape our community's agricultural identity.'

The words hit like a physical blow. Beside me, Elena's hands clench into fists beneath the table. I

think of her family's decades of flower farming, my grandmother's careful records, all reduced to 'playing at tradition.'

A chair scrapes against linoleum. Mai Chen rises, and something in her posture makes even Frank Detrick pause.

'Playing at tradition?' Her voice carries the quiet authority of someone who's served three generations of farmers their morning coffee. 'Let me tell you about tradition in Mill Creek Valley.'

She turns to face the crowd, her usual diner-owner smile replaced by fierce intensity. 'When my family bought the diner in '89, people said we'd destroy the valley's character. But you know who supported us? Margaret Miller. She understood something you're forgetting—this valley's strength comes from outsiders bringing new ideas.'

Mai's hand sweeps toward the historical society's display case along the wall. 'Those German settlers you're so proud of? They were outsiders once, bringing strange new farming methods. The Flores family's water conservation techniques? Outsider knowledge that saved half a dozen farms after the *derecho*.'

She pauses, making eye contact with Frank Detrick. 'And your own grandmother, Frank—she told me herself how Margaret Miller's hybrid growing

methods saved your family's farm during the drought of '92. Was she just *playing* at tradition too?

The room goes so quiet I can hear the heating system kick on. Kurt's uncle sinks slowly back into his seat, and I see Kurt fighting back a smile as he pulls up his next slide.

The final vote is 23-19 in favor, with three abstentions. Elena's hand finds mine under the table as Kurt announces the result, squeezing once before letting go. We maintain professional composure through the remaining agenda items, though Mai's knowing smile suggests we're not hiding our relief as well as we think.

The drive back to my farm feels surreal, Elena's truck following mine through the January darkness. We've spent so many evenings working late in her greenhouse that it's strange to be heading to my place instead, but the farmstand paperwork is spread across my sunroom table.

Ghost appears as soon as we step inside, weaving between our legs with unusual sociability. 'Someone's celebrating too,' Elena says, hanging her coat next to mine. The casual domesticity of the gesture makes my heart skip.

I plug in the electric kettle while Elena spreads out the heritage seed catalogs we've been collecting. The sunroom's usually cold this time of year, but between

the space heater and Ghost's purring presence between us on the loveseat, it feels surprisingly cozy.

'Look at these,' Elena says, opening to a dog-eared page. 'Vietnamese coriander. Mai mentioned your grandmother used to grow it.' Her finger traces the description, brushing against mine as I lean closer to read.

We work through the catalogs methodically, marking varieties that might appeal to different community needs. When Elena finds a listing for her family's traditional Mexican sunflowers, her voice catches slightly. 'These were the first seeds my father saved when they bought the farm.'

Without thinking, I cover her hand with mine. She turns her palm up, interlacing our fingers, and continues reading about soil requirements as if we've always sat this way, planning crops one-handed while Ghost dozes contentedly across our laps.

The seed catalogs gradually give way to sketch paper as we rough out the farmstand's layout. Elena draws quick, confident lines suggesting where each vendor's space might be, while I add notes about traffic flow and storage needs. Our hands keep meeting over the papers, lingering longer each time.

'We should probably finish the vendor applications,' I say eventually, though neither of us moves

Heritage Season

to get them from my desk. Ghost stretches and rearranges herself, somehow taking up even more space between us.

‘Probably,’ Elena agrees, but she’s looking at me instead of the papers, her thumb tracing small circles on my wrist. The air feels charged with possibility, like the moment before summer rain.

Chapter 5

Four months after the township meeting, I wake before my alarm to find Elena already up, moving through my kitchen—*our* kitchen now, really—with the quiet efficiency that still makes my heart skip. The pre-dawn light catches the silver in her dark hair as she packs thermoses with coffee, the same way she arranges flowers: methodical but tender.

‘Ghost’s already patrolling the farmstand,’ she says, handing me a mug. ‘I saw her doing rounds when I checked the greenhouse temperature.’

We’ve practiced this morning’s setup a dozen times, but there’s still a surreal quality to moving between the farmhouse and the new structure, its fresh wood still aromatic in the morning damp. The heritage seed display table Elena built from salvaged barn boards holds pride of place near the entrance, waiting for Mai’s promised contribution to the opening day spread.

Right on cue, Mai’s car pulls up just as the horizon starts pinking. She emerges with two large containers,

steam rising from the spring rolls. ‘Still warm,’ she announces, setting them beside a pie that could have come straight from my grandmother’s kitchen. The way she arranges them—Vietnamese and Pennsylvania Dutch sharing space like they’ve always belonged together—makes my throat tight.

‘Perfect timing,’ Elena says, adjusting the seed packets we spent hours organizing by growing season and difficulty level. ‘The light’s hitting the display just right.’

Mai steps back to admire the effect, then reaches into her bag. ‘One more thing.’ She pulls out a framed photo I’ve never seen: my grandmother and a much younger Mai, arranging flowers in the diner’s front window. ‘For the heritage wall,’ she says simply.

The crowd gathering for Kurt’s presentation surprises me—not just our usual supporters, but faces I haven’t seen since those tense early extension office meetings. Frank Deitrick stands near the back, arms crossed but listening intently as Kurt clicks through slides showing how our hybrid methods weathered the latest round of unseasonable storms.

‘These adaptation strategies,’ Kurt says, indicating a particularly striking comparison of soil retention rates, ‘combine traditional wisdom about water management with emerging climate science.’ He catches

my eye briefly, a silent acknowledgment of how far we've come from his initial skepticism.

I notice several conventional farmers taking photos of the technical diagrams with their phones. When Kurt opens the floor for questions, even Harold Weber raises his hand. 'That terracing technique,' he says, gesturing toward Elena's flower fields visible through the farmstand's windows, 'how long did it take to implement?'

Before Elena can answer, a commotion near the seed display draws everyone's attention. The Sullivan twins, barely four years old, are excitedly pointing at the heritage flower varieties. 'Miss Elena!' Sophie calls out, 'We got the purple ones growing! Just like you showed us!'

Their mother looks apologetic, but Elena's face lights up. 'The bachelor buttons?' she asks, crouching down to their level. 'From our seed-saving lesson at daycare?'

'They're this big now!' Tommy stretches his arms wide, making everyone laugh. 'And they look just like the picture of Miss Lien's grandma's flowers!'

Elena uses their enthusiasm to transition smoothly into her demonstration, gathering the children and several interested adults around the seed-saving station. I hang back, watching her hands move with

practiced grace as she shows them how to properly collect and store different varieties. The sight of the twins carefully handling seeds from my grandmother's flowers, their small faces intent with concentration, makes my chest tight in the best way.

Movement near the heritage flower display catches my attention—Ghost, who normally avoids crowds, has emerged from her usual patrol route to stretch out on the window ledge. The morning sun catches her silver fur, creating an almost ethereal effect as she surveys the gathered families.

'Well, look who decided to make an appearance,' Elena murmurs, pausing her demonstration. The children watch in fascination as Ghost deliberately grooms herself, claiming the space as if she's always held court here.

A camera shutter clicks, and I turn to see Dave Chen—Mai's nephew and the local paper's photographer—capturing the moment. Ghost doesn't even flinch at the flash, just continues her performance of casual ownership.

'Wait,' Mai says, reaching for her phone. She scrolls quickly through saved photos, then holds it up next to Dave's camera display. The parallel is striking: Ghost on the windowsill, surrounded by heritage flowers, mirrors almost exactly the pose of my grandmother's

old barn cat in a photo from 1992. Same window angle, same morning light, even the same variety of larkspur blooming in the background.

‘Your grandmother always said a farm wasn’t properly blessed until the cat claimed the best sunspot,’ Mai tells the gathered children, who are now completely distracted from seed-saving by Ghost’s regal presence. ‘Looks like we’ve got official approval.’

Elena catches my eye over the kids’ heads, her smile soft with understanding. We both know Ghost’s appearance isn’t just about sunbathing—she’s marking this space as an extension of her territory, accepting the public claiming of what was once her private domain.

As the seed-saving demonstration winds down, I check my phone—almost time for the field tour. The morning has flown by in a blur of conversations and small revelations, each moment feeling both carefully planned and somehow surprising.

‘Ready to show off your fancy trenches?’ Elena teases, falling into step beside me as we lead the group toward the north field. Her shoulder brushes mine, a casual touch that still sends warmth through me.

‘*Our* fancy trenches,’ I correct, noting with satisfaction how many of the skeptics from January’s township meeting have joined the tour. Frank Deitrick

even has his notebook out.

The water management system looks deceptively simple from ground level—gentle swales following the land’s natural contours, reinforced with both traditional stone work and modern permeable barriers. But as we reach the highest point, where Elena’s flower fields merge with my vegetable plots, the full design becomes clear.

‘The basic principle comes from Pennsylvania German four-square gardens,’ I explain, indicating the geometric pattern of beds and channels. ‘But we’ve incorporated Vietnamese rice terrace techniques for the slope sections.’ I catch Mai’s approving nod from the back of the group.

Harold Weber squints at the central collection pond, where native wetland plants are already establishing themselves. ‘That’s some mighty fine stonework,’ he says finally. ‘Reminds me of the old mill race.’

‘Should,’ Kurt adds, ‘since we had the historical society consult on the construction. Same techniques your great-grandfather would have used, just applied to modern drainage calculations.’

The questions that follow are technical, detailed—exactly the kind of practical interest we’d hoped for. Even Frank Deitrick contributes suggestions about seasonal maintenance based on his family’s experience

with similar systems.

As the group moves on to examine the greenhouse modifications, I notice Elena has stayed behind. She's kneeling by a patch of early-blooming larkspur, carefully selecting the most perfect specimens. The flower press from her grandmother rests open beside her, its worn wood catching the late morning sun.

'First flowers from our first real joint planting,' she says without looking up, her hands moving with practiced grace as she arranges the blooms. 'Seemed worth preserving the moment.'

The afternoon crowd gradually thins as shadows lengthen across the fields. Elena and I move through closing tasks with the same easy rhythm that marked our morning preparation, though now there's a bone-deep satisfaction underlying our fatigue.

'I'll finish up here if you want to get those flowers pressed properly,' I offer, noting how carefully she's been checking the larkspur specimens throughout the day.

She hesitates, clearly torn between helping and preserving the blooms at their peak. 'You're sure?'

'Go,' I insist. 'Ghost and I can handle final inventory.' As if summoned, the cat appears from behind a display basket, resuming her window ledge position from this morning.

Once the last tasks are complete, I find Elena in the sunroom. She's arranged the pressed flowers with an artist's eye, each bloom positioned to show its heritage characteristics. The old family Bible Mai returned to me after the *derecho* lies open beside her, my grandmother's preserved specimens carefully organized by year and variety.

'Look at this,' Elena says softly, indicating a pressed larkspur from 1987. 'The same deep purple as today's blooms. Thirty-six years of consistent color.'

I sit beside her, our shoulders touching as we compare specimens. Ghost jumps onto the windowsill, silhouetted against the evening sky in exactly the same pose she struck this morning. Her presence feels like approval as I carefully place Elena's newly pressed flowers alongside my grandmother's collection.

'Three generations,' Elena murmurs, her hand finding mine as we study the visual timeline: my grandmother's careful labels, Mai's preserved memories, and now our first joint harvest. 'Past, present, and future.'

Ghost's quiet purring accompanies us as we document today's additions, my grandmother's precise botanical notation style merging with Elena's artist's eye for detail and my tech-influenced data collection methods. The result feels right—not a preservation of

in. Melanie Penman

the past, but a living continuation of it.

