

## Chapter 2

### Daffodil

*Consider the lilies of the field. They do not labor or spin, Yet not even Solomon in all his glory was dressed like one of these. Matthew 6:28*

Holding the letter near the muted light of the window, Lizzy stared at the name of her benefactor. Daffodil DuPont. Aunt Daffy. She couldn't quite believe that her eccentric Aunt Daffy had left her Sweet Apple Farm. She sank into a wingback chair and let the paper fall from her hand.

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The memories flooded in. The mile-high log archway across the entrance. The hanging sign with the logo of an apple nestled among pine cones. The raised gilded lettering—**Sweet Apple Farm**. When she was just a girl, she'd spent one memorable and impressionable summer there.

Lizzy remembered that idyll with both joy and a certain sadness. She'd been reluctant to go. Scared even. All she knew about her great aunt Daffodil was that she was a spinster whose many eccentricities had led to her none-too-kind nickname—Aunt Daffy. Daffodil's generation of DuPont women were referred to somewhat derisively as the family's mixed bouquet. They had all been christened with the names of flowers: Daffodil, Iris, Rose, Lily, Violet... A riot of flora whose seed had all died out. Of all the sisters, only Aunt Daffodil had still been alive.

She'd requested Lizzy's stay as a favor to the lone survivor of her generation. An old woman who yearned for a glimpse of her kin. Lizzy's parents had spoken to Daffodil at length and finally agreed that a summer spent in the woman's company couldn't hurt. How old had Aunt Daffy been then? Seventy? Seventy-five?

But Lizzy had been possessed by the vivid imagination of a ten-year-old. Surely her great-aunt Daffy, who she had never seen, was as crazy as a loon...maybe even a witch. She most likely lived in a musty old farmhouse, reeking with the scent of flowery sachets tucked into drawers, the sitting rooms fussy with lace doilies protecting the arms of rose-patterned overstuffed chairs.

“We should have kept up better with my father's side of the family,” Dad lamented, spurred on by a trace of guilt. “But better late than never.” He ruffled her hair. “Don't worry, Lizzy. It will broaden your horizons. Attune you to nature.”

“A whole summer?” Lizzy had argued, scowling at such an absurd idea. “What about my friends?”

“It’s only a month or so,” he retorted. “Not a prison sentence. It’ll be fun.”

Lizzy wasn’t buying it. How could her parents banish their only child to Aunt Daffy's farm, a place far away from her comfortable home in the suburbs? Was it a delayed punishment for the many childhood crimes committed by her own fiery red-headed self over the years? Tattling on her schoolmates. Sneaking cookies in bed. Reading by flashlight under the covers. Stealing chocolates from her mother's hidden stash in the pantry crock deceitfully labeled “prunes.”

It looked like she was going to pay up now.

The fateful day for her visit to Aunt Daffy and the farm had come all too quickly. Lizzy could still remember the drive through the dark forest, arriving at last in the tiny settlement of Buttermilk Falls. It was a small town with striped canvas awnings shading storefronts reminiscent photos she’d seen of a bygone era. The manikins in the windows wore clothing hopelessly out of date. Farmers in straw hats and bib overalls lounged on a bench by the cafe. Her first impression was of a dusty town so small that if you blinked, you’d miss it.

They drove a few more bumpy miles in the family sedan and passed beneath the Sweet Apple Farm entrance. Lizzy craned her neck to look up at the farm logo on the sign suspended from a log archway that spanned the narrow dirt road.

Her first glimpse of Aunt Daffy did little to calm Lizzy's fears. Atop hair as wild and untamed as summer oats, the woman wore a shapeless straw hat. A few silk daffodils, tucked into a green ribbon, bobbed along the brim. Tanned and surprisingly fit for an old woman, she waved, breaking into a gapped-tooth grin. She hurried over to the car, sliding some pruners into the pockets of her worn jeans, which were tucked into a pair of scuffed work boots. Daffy's plaid shirt was faded to a muted gray-blue, like the sky losing its color at the end of day.

“Hullo...hullo.” Her blue eyes lit with some unreadable emotion. “Welcome to Sweet Apple Farm. Make yourselves to home.”

As the sun set, Lizzy's lone suitcase was brought up on the porch. A chicken dinner served round the kitchen table was tense with idle conversation and nervous smiles. Her parents, making excuses about the long drive back and the hotel room waiting a few hours away, departed as soon as the last dish was dried and put away in the yellow painted cupboard.

When the taillights of the sedan disappeared into the night, Aunt Daffy got right to the point. "I know you don't want to be here," she said. "Not that I blame you..." When she'd removed her hat for supper, Aunt Daffodil had used a piece of twine to tie back her untamed hair. She tugged at her wheat-colored pony-tail, threaded with gray, as she spoke. "You're most likely worryin' about spending the summer with your loony Aunt Daffy."

"Well...I..."

"It's all right, Lizzy-girl. You don't need to lie." She fingered the rim of her chipped china cup, the tea long since gone cold. "I'm sure we're gong to have a grand time together."

Lizzy doubted it.

"You ever been on a farm before?"

"No. I had a pet rabbit once. It died."

"I see."

"What will I do while I'm here?" Lizzy asked.

"Everything. Milk the cow. Tend the chickens. Weed the garden. Pick apples. Go swimming in the pond." Daffodil rinsed out her cup at the sink. "I promise you this. It'll be a time to remember. I've got a feeling you need this summer almost as much as I do."

Lizzy stifled a yawn, the long day catching up with her.

"I'll show you to your room," said Aunt Daffodil. "Best get some sleep. Around here we get up with the chickens."

Lizzy followed her down the short hallway leading to the stairs. She took a peek at the living room as they passed by. No lace doilies on the forest green armchairs, only a warm lap robe carelessly tossed on the back of the sofa.

Upstairs, Daffodil opened the door to a tidy bedroom, the dormer windows thrown open to let in the cool evening breeze. A cherry wood four-poster bed dominated the space, the flower-patterned quilt turned down in invitation. A bouquet of sunflowers brightened the nightstand. The bedside lamp was on, casting the room in a soft warm glow. A corner bookshelf held a random assortment of storybooks, a small picture Bible, comic books, children's classics, and

cardboard game boxes worn at the edges, showing signs of hard use. A wicker bin of assorted toys was stored in the closet.

“I thought you didn’t have any kids.” Lizzy picked up a floppy stuffed teddy bear.

“I don’t,” Aunt Daffy smiled. “But my friends do and I like to keep the lot of ‘em entertained when they visit.”

“Oh...” Lizzy liked the feel of the room, drawn to its coziness like a languid cat stretching in a patch of a sunlight.

A doorway opened to an adjoining bath with a toilet and claw-foot tub with a wicker basket of fluffy white towels set beside it. A recessed shelf held bar soap, shampoo, bubble bath, a bottle of lotion and a scrub brush.

“Let me know if you need anything,” Aunt Daffy said. “My room’s right down the hall.”

“Thank you.” Lizzy sat down on the bed, looking out the window at the big yellow moon. It seemed close enough to touch.

Daffodil paused in the doorway, her hand on the knob. “Nite, nite, Lizzy. Don’t let the bed-bugs bite.”

*Bed bugs?* When the door clicked shut, Lizzy jumped up on a Windsor chair and scanned the room, holding her hairbrush aloft as a weapon. What did bed-bugs look like? How big were they? Seeing nothing, she climbed down and cautiously opened the closet door. The menacing shadows vanished when she pulled the light chain, revealing only the toy box, empty clothes hangers and a floppy straw hat on the shelf.

She turned off the closet light, her breathing slowing to match the rhythm of the crickets chirping outside. She put her toiletries in the bathroom, relinquishing her death grip on the hairbrush. She unpacked her suitcase, putting her clothes in the bureau drawers, and her shoes on the floor of the closet. She changed into her nightgown, brushed her teeth, ran the hairbrush through her tangled red hair, grimaced at her reflection in the mirror, and crawled into bed. The mattress was soft as a cloud. The sheets smelled like summer, of linens dried in the sun.

Lizzy was asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

“Rise and shine,” sang out Aunt Daffy a moment later.

Lizzy forced one eyelid open. It was still dark. Out in the yard, a rooster crowed. *Cock-a-doodle-doo!!* Just like in the storybooks...only a whole lot louder. She pulled the blankets

over her head, just before her aunt drew the whole lot back and tossed the covers to the floor.

“Let's get crackin', Sweetness. We're burnin' daylight.”

The sun was still just a rosy suggestion on the horizon when Lizzy staggered down for breakfast. Scrambled eggs as yellow as dandelions. Biscuits, warm from the oven, dripping butter and boysenberry jam. Bacon, nearly burnt...just the way she liked it. She was smiling as she downed a glass of fresh milk, jiggling the flip-flop on her foot up and down.

“You bring any real shoes?” asked Daffodil.

“Tennis shoes...”

“Good. Go put them on.”

“But I always wear flip-flops.”

“Not when cow flop or chicken droppings start squishing between your bare toes.”

Daffodil dried the skillet with a muslin towel.

Lizzy changed her shoes in record time.

Aunt Daffy pointed to a basket on a hook by the back door. “Grab that basket and we'll gather some eggs.”

Who knew chickens could be so friendly? The hens came up to them, clucking like long-lost friends. Her aunt threw out some food scraps and the hens darted after it. Amid the contented birds, Lizzy soon lost her fear and came out from behind her aunt, who handed her a tin of feed.

“Go ahead. Toss it out to the girls,” she encouraged.

Lizzy grabbed a handful of meal and flung it to the chickens. They scurried about, clucking and scratching as they pecked up the grain, their soft copper-colored feathers alight in the sunshine.

“While they're busy, we'll raid the nest boxes.” Daffodil led the way to the henhouse.

Reaching out a tentative hand to a brown egg nestled in straw, Lizzy touched it and jerked back in alarm. “It's warm,” she said.

“Of course it is. My hens have been broody lately, hankerin' for some chicks so they stay on the nest.” Daffodil gathered up a few brown eggs, setting them in Lizzy's basket.

“Gather up some eggs, Lizzy-girl. They won't hop into your basket by themselves.”

Lizzy reached for an egg again. This time she plucked it up and added it to the container. She knew that eggs came from chickens, of course. But until now she hadn't realized that eggs

really did come from living creatures—the friendly hens in the yard outside and most likely the hapless chicken they’d had for supper last night. Here in the henhouse, she felt alive...connected to the earth in a real way. The warmth of the eggs, the dust motes floating in the air, the clucking of the chickens and the ripe smell of the henhouse invaded her senses.

The dreaded summer had quickly turned into an idyll of discovery. Lizzy climbed the apple trees and, with sweet-tart juice dripping from a mouthful of crunchy fruit, she learned the difference between a Pink Lady and a Braeburn. She walked the Christmas tree farm on the north edge of the property, breathing in the warm pitchy air, while Aunt Daffy showed her how to stake baby pine tree seedlings. She helped milk the cow, pulled weeds, planted lettuce, and ate sun-ripened tomatoes right off the vine. Under Aunt Daffy's tutelage, she built water wheels in the creek and made apricot jam. They turned cucumbers into tart green pickles, packed into Mason jars and covered with vinegar and sweet smelling spices.

Lizzy had expected a fussy old woman, reeking of lavender, and intolerance for a pesky, rambunctious kid like her. Instead she’d found a warm, energetic woman who loved the land and the unfolding adventure of each new day. For some unknown reason Aunt Daffy loved Lizzy as well. She tucked the awkward girl under her wing, like a mother hen brooding her chick. Her bright blue eyes twinkled with mischief as she introduced her great-niece to their next escapade.

Lizzy took to wearing the floppy hat from the closet and often as not, she tucked daisies or yellow sour grass flowers into the ribbon on the brim to match her aunt’s spirited array of daffodils. Her pale skin freckled from the sun, and her soul opened to the warmth of nature, green eyes alight with wonder. The two were kindred spirits...from their untamed disarray of curls, one wheat colored, the other rooster red, to their endless curiosity.

At night, they read books together. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. *Black Beauty*, and the poetry of Emily Dickenson. They played checkers, knitted scarves, baked persimmon cookies with walnuts. Daffodil would play old records on the phonograph—the big bands and songs from musicals like *Carousel* and *Oklahoma*. They pulled back the rug and danced until they collapsed in a heap of giggles.

Over time, Lizzy met the colorful parade of friends Daffodil had befriended. The shopkeepers of Buttermilk Falls. Old men who came to supper. Small boys who’d caught rainbow trout in the stream and offered a full stringer to Daffodil’s in exchange for ginger

cookies. Women from neighboring farms who brought along cherry pies and the latest gossip. Aunt Daffy's warm laughter brought life to every corner of the sun-drenched kitchen.

Until the farm, Lizzy hadn't known what it meant to grow warm with honest sweat, get dirt under your fingernails, play with kittens in the fragrant hay mow or fall into bed so blessedly tired that sleep stole over you before you could even shut your eyes. When she woke with the chickens, it was to the smell of warm biscuits straight from the oven, drizzled with honey from the hive at the edge of the apple orchard. A summer so sweet you could taste it.

But then one day it had all come to a discordant end. Lizzy's parents drove up unexpectedly in a whirl of dust. Frantically, they'd instructed her to pack.

"But, why?" she asked.

"Do as we say," Dad said, frowning. "Pack up your things quickly and bring your suitcase downstairs right away."

But how could she pack up her golden summer? It was spread on every shelf. Her treasured heart-shaped rocks. Dried flowers, jars of canned apricots, dehydrated apples strung into colorful wreaths. On impulse, Lizzy snatched a favorite memento from the toy box—a miniature rag doll dressed in overalls with blue button eyes and yarn hair the color of summer oats. She hid it in her suitcase.

"It's all a terrible mistake," pleaded Aunt Daffy. "You can't believe everything you've heard."

"If half of it is true, we have reason enough to be concerned," Mom whispered, worrying her bottom lip.

"Please...let me explain. I'd never put Lizzy in danger."

"We're taking her home. That's that." Dad said. "We should never have let her come in the first place."

Aunt Daffodil was crying when Lizzy left, giving her one last quick hug as she was hurried out the door. "I'm so sorry, Sweetness," she said. Some of her wild hair had pulled loose from her pony tail, falling haphazardly around her face.

Lizzy sobbed as she looked back out the dusted rear window. She put her hand against the glass to hold on to what she'd found there. Trying to hold on to her dear Aunt Daffy who, blotting her face with her apron, raised one hand in sad farewell.

Her parents wouldn't talk about what happened...about why she was whisked away. And Lizzy never learned what precipitated the rift. What terrible thing had Aunt Daffodil done? For months, Lizzy pined for the woman who had given her so much. She missed the country, the smells, the apples, the farm, the trees...even the chickens. The dried apple wreath seemed out of place in her room in the suburbs. The few rocks she'd hidden in her suitcase found their way outside, lost in the weeds.

But in the way of children, Lizzy soon got busy with other things. The images of Sweet Apple Farm grew hazy, with only the occasional random scent of new-mown hay tugging the threads of memory.

She had never gone back to see her great aunt in all the years since. And now her beloved Aunt Daffy, like her parents, was dead.

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Gabe replaced the missing screws on Charlie Martin's screen door hinge, tightening them down. It grieved him to see the gnarled curve of the elderly man's arthritic fingers. The pain had rendered Charlie helpless to do these ordinary chores which had once been as easy as for his mentor as splitting wood. Charlie's frame had grown stooped and his once dark hair had washed to white, forming a halo around his head. Gabe refused the proffered bills for payment. He took care to bring in some logs for the man's old-fashioned Ben Franklin stove before he left. It was little enough he could do for the man who took him on as an apprentice carpenter after his own parents had kicked him out. Even when he'd been a hot-headed, rebellious sixteen-year-old with little to recommend him.

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Looking back, Gabe had to admit that he'd been pretty worthless as a carpenter or most anything else when he'd begrudgingly showed up under a court order for work with Charlie. It



was either that and a temporary home with the eccentric Miss Daffodil DuPonte or jail time for petty theft.

The resentful chip on his shoulder had been gradually worn away by the feel of raw wood, smooth beneath his fingers. Gabe found that he liked the heft of a board and the swiftness of a saw cutting planks into the shape and lines of something solid—a porch railing, or the roof and walls of a storage shed. Charlie was demanding, but patient, explaining the mysterious blueprints that translated into foundations, framing, wall board and windows.

He helped Charlie build a small house on a vacant half acre of dirt and weeds. As the building took shape, Gabriel discovered the joy of creating something lasting with his hands. The pungent smell of sawdust, the whine of the saw, the changing pitch of a nail hammered deep into lumber, suited him. The aimlessness which had led to pilfering beer at the local gas station, petty theft and vandalizing property, dissolved as he found work he enjoyed.

“Not bad. Not bad at all,” said Charlie as the two stood back to admire the finished house—a home framed, plumbed, wired, painted, and shingled, new windows gleaming in the sunlight. Gabe grinned. He'd built this. He and Charlie. They piled tools, ladders, paint cans and sawhorses back into the truck, and Gabe turned to take a last look at their project.

He kicked at the dirt, his throat suddenly gone dry. “Mr. Martin...I...uh...my contract runs out today...” He fidgeted with the neck of his sweat-stained shirt. “I was wonderin'...would you let me stay on for a while longer, workin' for you?”

Charlie gave him a hard look. “Think you've earned the chance?”

The boy's eyes strayed to the newly completed house. “I tried my best, sir...” His shoulders hunched in defeat. “I appreciate all you taught me.”

“You like the work?”

“Yes, sir. I do.”

“You plan on keeping your head screwed on straight?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then be at the shop 6:00 sharp tomorrow morning. We've got a remodel to look at.”

He pumped Charlie's hand. “Thank you, sir...I'll give you my best.”

Gabe had made sure he kept his promise to Charlie Martin. Over the years they formed a working partnership that suited them both. Together they constructed houses, stores, fences,

chests of drawers, even coffins. If it was made of wood they could build it. Gabe barely noticed when Charlie gradually turned over more of the work load to him; first the heavy lifting, then the book work as well. Not until the past few years had his mentor retired, turning over his business to a kid once on probation.

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As Gabe tested out the replaced hinges, a cold nose touched his elbow. He looked down at a young female Aussie mix. “When did you get a dog, Charlie?” he asked, petting the pretty head and being rewarded by the dog’s shimmy of delight.

Charlie came to the door, and held the screen open for the dog to enter. “My granddaughter Sarah brought her to me a while back. She thought a dog would be good company.” He scratched his white thatch of hair. “Darned if she wasn’t right. I’ve taken to the pup like whistlin’ Dixie. That’s what I call her...Dixie.”

“Nice name,” said Gabe. “You need any help with her? Kibble? Vet check? A doghouse maybe?”

Charlie’s round cheeks colored. “No thanks. The new vet down in Deer Creek gave her all her shots and well...truth be told, Dixie sleeps in the house.” It was a hard admission from a hardened country carpenter who’d always believed farm animals, including cats and dogs, belonged outside.

“Well, I’ll be...” chuckled Gabe. “You’re goin’ soft on me.”

“Mind your manners,” retorted Charlie, shutting the door behind him.

After leaving Charlie's place, Gabe headed to Pine Ridge Elementary where his daughter Chloe was just about to get out of school. He didn't dare be late. She'd already had enough abandonment to last a lifetime. Had it already been four years since his wife had walked out on the both of them?

“Hi, Sweetheart.” He pulled her into a hug.

“Daddy, you're here,” Her grip tightened around his neck.

“I'm here,” he murmured into her dark curls. *I'll always be here for you.*

As they drove to their log house at the edge of the forest, Gabe eyed the darkening clouds stacking up against the crest of Lonesome Mountain. A storm was coming. He drove a little faster. Already a rumble of thunder growled in the distance. He checked the rear view mirror.

In the backseat, Chloe's eyes widened in terror as a zig-zag of white-hot lightning descended from the black cauldron of clouds. "I hate the lightning, daddy. Please don't let the lightning get me!" Thunder boomed across the valley. Chloe cringed and covered her ears. "Make it stop, Daddy! Please, make it stop!"

Gabe sighed, swamped with a well-worn feeling of ineptitude. He wasn't God. How in heck was he supposed to silence a storm? Here in the mountains, thunder storms were commonplace. Many summer afternoons things clouded up and nature had a little temper tantrum. This one would likely blow over nearly as quickly as it blew in.

But try to tell Chloe that. It was like trying to tell a storm-terrorized dog not to tremble and crawl under the bed. He'd had a dog like that once. Ol' Blue could stalk a mountain lion, tree a coon, and happily wait all day in the shade of an oak for him to come back down the dirt path from school. But at the first distant rumble of thunder, he'd jump through a window screen to get inside and hide beneath Gabe's bed in a blind panic, as if a horde of banshees were after him.

Gabe carried Chloe into the house, her slight frame trembling in his arms. "How about Sesame Street," he said, flicking on the TV. He shut the curtains against the storm, snuggled next to his daughter on the couch, and turned the volume up.

*One...two...three...I love to count...ha, ha, ha...four...five...six...* By the time the purple-cloaked Count reached ten, the storm had moved on.

"Want some Spaghetti-O's?" he asked, opening a can. He'd shamelessly ply his daughter with her favorite foods to bring her back from her terror. "I might even have some peanut butter stuffed pretzels."

Chloe's eyes began to focus. "Yeah...Spaghetti-O's. They're my favorite."

He plopped the tomato-hued mess into a pan. "Coming right up, my Princess." Gabe donned the white chef's hat he kept handy for these little episodes. "Your chef awaits your slightest wish. Cup or bowl?" He wiggled his ears.

Chloe giggled and came to the table, picking up her spoon. "Cup," she said. "And more pretzels, please."

Gabe stirred his own cup of Spaghetti-O's trying to ignore the cloying scent and mushy texture. What he'd give for a nice juicy steak and a baked potato the size of a regulation football. "Delicious," he said, forcing down a bite. Chloe was smiling. "Simply delicious."

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Was the universe conspiring against her? Lizzy turned the water faucet off and back on again. Nothing came out. The plumbing was on the fritz again. And her landlord was notoriously slow with repairs. She left the dishes in the sink and stood on the deck of her bungalow, letting the air dampen her curly red hair into an impossible frizz. She paced the porch, watching the lights come on in the city below. The red towers of the Golden Gate Bridge disappeared into the gathering fog.

As the mist swirled around her, she tried to conjure up the image of her aunt. Gap-toothed smile, shining eyes, wild hair beneath a straw hat decorated in daffodils. Maybe Aunt Daffy had been a little crazy after all. Maybe she was a little crazy herself to think moving there could ever work out. What awful secret...what danger had caused the lasting family rift?

Lizzy shivered as the fog crept up, shrouding the tiny houses nestled against each other on the steep hillside. A trolley bell *clanged* in the distance.