

"The Feedlot"

"You guys really got lucky with this place," announced the real estate agent. "The bank just put it on the market a few days ago. You're actually the first couple to look at it. If you would have waited a few more days, I bet this place would be swarmed."

Carmen turned up her nose. Somehow she doubted that there would be much interest in a run-down old farm. She wasn't really sure what it was that her husband David liked so much about it. There was plenty of space, sure, but there was also plenty of dead land.

"Are you sure this is the house you want to spend your inheritance on?" She took a quick look around what she assumed would become the living room. The carpet was worn, the wallpaper was peeling off, and the windows were cracked.

David walked over to the same peeling wallpaper and ran his hand along it. "This is exactly the sort of house my father would have loved." A pained smile spread over his face. "It's got good bones."

Carmen reached over to the banister at her left, which moved more than it should have for such a soft touch. Even the bones had seen better days. Still, she was determined to see him happy. They had been looking for nearly four months already, and if they waited too much longer, they'd be bringing a newborn home to their one-bedroom flat.

She thought back to the day he'd gotten the call. David was due to come home from work any minute. Carmen waited for him on the couch, hiding a stick with two pink lines in the pocket of her robe. They had been trying since shortly after they got married, and Carmen couldn't contain her excitement. It was finally her turn.

But when David came home, his face was made of stone. "My mother called," he said dryly as he opened the cabinet over the stove. He pulled out a bottle of whiskey and two small glasses. "My father died today." Silently Carmen walked to the kitchen and placed the test on the counter before draping her arms around David. He and his father had suffered a falling out a few years back, and while they were no longer contemptuous, their relationship was still spotty, at best.

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David swigged the first glass of whiskey, and then picked up the test Carmen had laid on the counter. Without a word, he looked at the test, then threw it in the trash and took the second shot of whiskey. He shrugged off his wife's comfort and headed into the bedroom, where he spent much of the next few months. If it hadn't been for the sizable inheritance and Carmen's part-time work at the local cafe, they never would have made it through.

Carmen brushed off the thoughts of the past. David had come back to his normal self in time for the 20-week ultrasound, and seeing his beautiful baby girl on the screen helped to push him back out of the depression he'd sunk into. He started attending therapy, and the two worked together to find a house that met all their demands. Unfortunately, most of the demands belonged to David, and now Carmen was wishing she had put more input in the selection process.

Carmen sighed before asking the real estate agent, "Can we have the rest of the tour, please?" With one hand on her stomach and the other at her husband's side, she listened as the agent spoke about the house and its previous owners.

"If I'm being frank, the bank has owned this house for quite some time, but they wanted to make sure everything was ready before they placed it. The last owners were presumed to be into some pretty dark stuff, but of course we've gone through and ensured that all their things have been removed." She walked toward the quaint kitchen and continued speaking. "It's just such a shame that they didn't put more work into it while they were still here." Just as quickly as she'd brought it up, she moved on to discussing the appliances.

"The stove is new, as is the fridge. There's no dishwasher or laundry, but there are hookups available if you've got your own." A few more steps led them to the other side of the large staircase, and the agent raised her hand to point toward the landing. "The stairs lead up to the second floor, with four bedrooms and two bathrooms. Perfect for a growing family." She then smiled in Carmen's direction. "There's a third bathroom on the ground floor, too, in case you've got some guests over. But I actually have another client meeting soon, and I don't have time to

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walk you through the rest of the house. I did take the liberty of printing out some blueprints of the property, though -- just in case you wanted a little map." She quickly dug through her bag before handing out a few printed sketches of the house.

"Thanks, these will definitely come in handy if we decide to remodel," David said as Carmen grabbed them and flipped through them.

"Not a problem. I hope you guys take really good care of her -- this house could really be something special with the right owners." A smile swept across her face and the trio took turns shaking hands. "I'll let you know if there are any issues with your check." Carmen and David followed her to the porch and watched as she made her way to her car and down the long driveway. This was it -- they owned a house.

The couple decided to hire a team to fix up the house so that it would be ready in time for the baby's arrival, but the feedlot he wanted to do personally. That's what his father would have wanted, what he would have done. A man who couldn't work his own land wasn't really a man at all. To an extent, that had been part of their falling out. David refused to work the family feedlot after high school, choosing instead to study agricultural business in an effort to push for expansion.

However, now he was the one in charge. He could prove himself by fixing up the pens and getting the machinery in good order, and then prove his strategy by bringing in the best people for each individual job. He wanted more for his kids than the life of cattle producers. With the right team, he wouldn't need to worry about all the minor details. His vision was revolutionary and he had every intention of seeing it through until he one day retired. His children would have the choice whether they took over the business or left someone else to run it in their place. And, of course, his kids would have a job to fall back on any time they needed a little money to make it through. The plan was perfect.

Unfortunately, someone forgot to tell the baby the plan, and she came into the world three weeks early. Carmen elected to stay in the hospital for a few days after baby Victoria was

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born, while David agreed to wait at the new house to welcome the team. David made her promise they would stay in the apartment until the house was ready. He looked down at his newborn daughter in his arms. "I don't want to think of what would happen if either of you were taken from me."

Carmen made him promise, in return, that he'd let the team help fix up the lot. "Honey, you have nothing to prove to that man. If he didn't know you were right, he wouldn't have left you the money." She grabbed Victoria back from her husband's arms and positioned her to nurse. "If you want us to stay away until everything is ready, then get everything ready quickly."

So, it was decided. The next few weeks flew by with Carmen deep in the trenches of being a new mom all by herself. Things at the feedlot were progressing rapidly, too; with the team's help, the lot could be ready for the first few animals by the time his family was moving in. He thought it would be best to focus on the smaller animals first - chickens and ducks could be brought in for cheap, but they'd have to start bringing a profit before there was a budget for cows and pigs.

When Carmen first brought Victoria to the house, it looked nothing like it had just a month prior. The nursery was a special surprise; David had told the workers to focus especially on the nursery since they would be spending so much time in there. It was beautiful, too. Gorgeous autumn colors danced on the walls in a mural straight out of a romantic comedy. She couldn't tell if it was her hormones or if she was just especially emotional because of their time apart, but she cried tears of joy as she placed Victoria into her crib.

Managing the feedlot turned out to be more work than David had originally anticipated. He had learned practically since birth how to handle things on his own, but without his father's voice booming in the background, things were different. None of the previous owners' records remained, either; the real estate agent had said that everything had been purged. David had hoped that only pertained to the personal effects and whatever "dark things" they had been into, but it was as if any trace of them and their suppliers had vanished into thin air.

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No matter what he did, the animals failed to thrive. He changed feed suppliers. He changed poultry sellers. He even ran a new well, fearing that the old one had been poisoned somehow. After twelve different changes, less than half of the original animals had actually survived to the slaughter, and of that half most were emaciated or cannibalistic. They were able to sell enough to stay afloat, but David's inheritance was running low. A few new chicks had been born on the property, but they failed to thrive, too.

Dejected, David took the plunge and bought a dozen pigs, hoping that venture would be more successful. They seemed to fare a little better than the birds had, but still David had problems with them from the start. Thankfully, two of them fell pregnant and three others fetched a good price at market. Still, in order to turn a profit, he'd have to slaughter the pigs himself. That was the one aspect of this business he had never been able to fully get behind. Still, his daughter was almost a year old and his business plan still wasn't coming together yet. He had to do something, or he'd be condemning her to the same life he'd refused for himself.

The poultry yards quickly fell into disrepair as even the team wasn't able to keep up with the deaths of the birds. As the last of the chickens killed each other, the deaths among the piglets started. In time, the pigs turned on each other one by one, just as the chickens had. David spent most of his time out in the yard trying to fix the problem, but insisted that Carmen and Victoria stay in the house. There were far too many carcasses about, and Victoria was walking more and more every day.

Once the last of the pigs wasted away, David and Carmen's marriage began wasting away, too. Sex was a thing of the past as David left before the sun was up and didn't come back in the house until long after the sun had set. Most days, he was covered in the stench of corpses left rotting in the sun on a hot summer day. When Carmen had first moved out of the master bedroom, she told herself it was so that she could be closer to the baby, but as time went on she came to accept that it was much more than that. This house was running out of things to take from them.

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By winter, the family was in shambles, but the house had never looked better. The team of hands had long gone. Some quit when the money ran dry, but a few remained until the very end (although they all kept outside employment). The final loyal few came over a few times a week to help with small home repairs; it was clear to everyone that the couple couldn't afford to pay anyone, but no one mentioned it out of fear of embarrassing their dear friends.

Truthfully, anything resembling shame and embarrassment had long since left, too. While Carmen had once took such pride in her appearance, now she was often seen drunk in her lingerie by noon. Victoria was big enough to get around by herself, and there was generally someone there to feed her if Carmen couldn't be bothered. Any time David emerged from his study, he was met with slurred insults and tears from his wife, so he kept himself locked away. No one said a thing, but people stopped coming back. It was far too awkward to witness.

The last remaining team member was the first to find Victoria's lifeless body in the basement. It looked as if she had been pushed down the stairs, her head twisted all the way behind her neck and her arms snapped at the elbows. A blood-curdling shriek came from the top of the stairs, and a barely-conscious Carmen came staggering toward them. The visitor tried to explain what she thought had happened to the little girl, but Carmen was unresponsive. Her gaze was frozen on her daughter. Everything blurred together until, at long last, Carmen passed out in the middle of the entryway.

When Carmen came to, she was covered in dried blood. "Ma'am, are you OK?" The voice was barely audible at first, but grew over the next few minutes. "Ma'am, I need to know if you're injured. This is a lot of blood and I need to know if it's yours or hers." A uniformed officer pointed to the living room. Spread out on the floor lay the worker, who looked to have been dead for at least a couple days at this point. Carmen was speechless.

After a few minutes, a female voice came from the kitchen, near the basement door. "Sir, I believe we have two more bodies in here." The first officer let out a sigh and shook his head.

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"We'll have to bring them on out to the front," he replied. He then turned to Carmen. "Ma'am, I think we need to get down to the station. I have a few questions for you. Would you like to get dressed in something more appropriate?" A few seconds passed before Carmen nodded, and the officer motioned for his partner to escort her up the stairs. She was clearly in no position to go up there unaccompanied. While the female officer helped Carmen to change, the male officer drug the bodies to the porch. After what seemed like an eternity, the women finally emerged.

Carmen took a deep breath. She knew what she had to do next. In an instant, she pushed her escort down the tall staircase. The crash and crunch as she hit the bottom was deafening. The male officer ran in with his gun drawn. A sinister smile crept across Carmen's face as she extended her wrists to be cuffed.

As the police loaded Carmen into the car, she turned back and glared in disgust at David's lifeless body laying on the front steps. She stared into the wreckage where his face used to be and hissed, "I told you I hated this fucking house."