

# A Tale of Two Ladies

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Smells of the hayloft itch at my nose. I wrinkle it and rub with my sleeve, driving the dust further in. I sneeze, nearly losing my hold on the ladder.

One,  
two,  
three.

Always three, in rapid succession, each one stronger than the last. Grandma says my sneezes are magic, a Trinity she calls 'em. It's not magic. It's hayfever, and it ain't pretty.

"Cassaday? Cassaday, you in here?"

I brush my index finger under my nose a few times checking to make sure there is nothing hanging. It wouldn't be the first time. My sneezes are neither subtle nor dry. "Here, Cliff," I call as I descend the last three steps of the ladder. My voice catches funny and my armpits prickle.

"I thought I heard you sneeze." Cliff smiles at me, stepping into the shade of the barn, one edge of his mouth slightly higher than the other, but it's his eyebrows I see. They dance, a slight jump just before the smile reaches the rest of his face.

"Yeah, just a little hay-dust." I reach up to smooth out my hair. My fingers stumble consciously over the lumps on my crown. I could never get it sleek like Beth Anne's. I feel my face reddening. My tummy flutters, then growls unflatteringly. I'm not sure if I want to eat or throw-up.

"Casssaday."

I smile. I love the way Cliff says my name. Gentle, like I'm a lady. All ladies have soft sounding names, and the way he says mine gives it purpose. No one else says my name like that. Most often at home I get a harsh Cassie or worse yet, Cass. If you don't listen carefully enough it sounds like "crass," that's Beth Anne's favorite way to call me.

Something in Cliff's voice changes and he's twisting the crown of his cap. "Your, uh... your Granddaddy wants me to bring him a hen." His eyes nod to the opposite end of the barn behind me. I notice his eyebrows. They are still.

*Oh, no.*

My stomach shifts again, this time a drop like that elevator we went on at the World's Fair last year.

Cliff slides his hands into his pockets, his gaze sideways. He won't look at me.

I can't swallow. "Which hen?" My nose is tingling again. *Please don't let it be Grey, please don't let it be Grey.*

He scratches the side of his face, where he's been letting the sideburn grow in, winces when he says, "Gimpy, your buff."

"It's not... it's not *Gimpy*. Her name's Lady Grey." My lip betrays me and starts a weird wobble.

Cliff is now scratching at his neck, reshuffling his hair under his cap, looking around anywhere, at anything, other than me.

I'm all stinging and throat-lumpy. My eyes burn. It hurts. My throat really hurts.

Cliff steps forward, "I'll just go and get-"

"No." I hold my hand out and step in his path.

"Cassaday." His voice is quiet. "Your granddaddy said-"

"No. I'll bring her. She's my hen. I should be the one to do it."

I look at Lady Grey scratching around at the far end of the barn, pecking her way toward a dust-filled patch of sunlight. One foot turns out at an odd angle, always has, but she'd been a fine layer, gentle, and one of my favorites.

I try to swallow past the knot. I knew I had been courting disaster naming the flock of hens, especially during my British history faze, but I couldn't help it. Granddaddy had given me my own flock of layers to raise nearly three years ago on my tenth birthday with the understanding that when their egg laying days were done they were destined for the soup pot – ours or our neighbors. In a cruel twist of fate Lady Anne was the first to go. Now it looked to be Lady Grey's turn.

I call her softly, "Here, chick, chick," kneel down and coax Lady Grey into my waiting arms. She *buh, buh, buaAhawkhes* her way to me, twitches her head and blink-blinks her eyes, looking for a handout. She steps up onto my lap with her good leg first, a slight hop and pinch as her nails grab on. She settles down and flattens out to rest. Elizabeth, the Rhode Island Red, flaps

her wings, beating at the air, neck high like a rooster. She's too good for a cuddle, always has been, and she lets all the other hens know it.

I stroke Lady Grey's feathers from top to tail, pulling up a bit at the end just the way she likes it. She sinks further into my lap and coos, purring in that chicken way. She *buh-buh-buaahawkhhs* a few times and twitches her head from side to side, quirky and content. I feel my nose tickle again, and sniff something rather large back up that's about to come loose.

"Cass! Cass-i-Dee! Where are you? Granddaddy's waiting on you, and he don't like to be waitin'." The call comes from round the side of the barn. *She* will be here any minute.

I wipe the tears forming in my eyes, pull Lady Grey close to me, and stand up with her tucked football-like under my arm. Sensing a confrontation she pulls up her legs.

"Cass! Cass-i-Dee!" The footsteps stop in the wide opening of the barn. I know I'm about to be scolded by my older sister. Defying all things natural, not a cloud of dust blemishes the shoes or the perfectly rolled bobby socks of she who stands there. It slinks away like a naughty dog. I look down at my own socks, one high, one low. Lines of dirt on the tall one showing where it was scrunched the day before. Dirt doesn't hide from me.

"There you are." She goes from mad to glad in a second when she sees I am not alone. "Oh, Cliff." She holds her breath a moment and smiles. "How *are* you?" Beth Anne, of the perfectly pressed bobby socks, fluffs her platinum locks while I schlump into my chicken, the one destined for the chopping block.

Beth Anne. Beth Anne the constant reminder of what I am not. Beth Anne's got three years on me and a whole lot more curves and charming ways.

Cliff is noticing her, too. The hourglass lines, the baby-soft hair. His Adam's apple jogs up and down in time with his eyes. She stands out anywhere, but here in the barn she looks like a movie star. I glance down - no buds on this sapling. I shift Lady Grey in front of me, wrapping both arms around her.

"Cass," Beth Anne stresses the hard c, flutters her eyes. Anyone other than me would think she is being kind. "Granddaddy is looking for that chicken. He sent me in here to get you."

"*Achu.*" Beth Anne lets go a delicate flower of a sneeze, a very lady-like kitten-sized sneeze. You could scarcely hear it standing next to her. She blinks her eyes, opens them all wide and innocent, says, "My, excuse me."

I feel my rage building. How? Just how is it possible to sneeze like that? My mother had once suggested I try to hold it in when I sneezed, like Beth Anne. “That way you won’t make such a fuss dear.” She meant mess. I took her advice. It was the one time I ended on a first sneeze, but it came at a price. I blew out my eardrum. Lit-er-all-y.

I felt that sneeze coming and braced myself. I held my breath and plugged my nose thinking I could swallow it down. I had wonderful visions of a baby-sized sneeze. It wouldn’t be half as elegant as Beth Anne’s, but it would be dainty, not grandpa-like as I was prone to do. It rose within me, but I was glued tight. My lips would not part, my nose would not open, stampeding cattle and a flash flood couldn’t make me move. But, it’s a scientific fact. You can’t squelch a sneeze.

My lips burbled first and pressure built behind my ears. One hand squeezing my nostrils shut, the other bracing on the counter. It wanted to be strong, but I wouldn’t let it. *I* would conquer *it*. For some reason the Alamo came to mind.

An involuntary bob forward and then.... WHAM. My forehead slammed the counter as that sneeze exploded out of me and blew me apart.

There was a brief delay, and then the pain. I screamed, at least I think I screamed. There was a strange hum, like after an explosion. My head hurt, but my right ear felt like it had been split in two. I stumbled and knocked a jar of standing cream to the floor. It smashed at my feet, baby clumps of butter spotting the brown of my shoes like cheese curd.

Grandma came running, boobs swinging from side to side on a course all of their own. Eyes wild, her mouth jammering, she reached for me, but there was no sound. She folded me in an Aunt Jemima hug while scolding my mother over her shoulder. Once she was sure I was in one piece, more or less, she held me back to look at me. The pain was still dulling my head, but I could see her eyes were on my ear and my eyes went to the shoulder of her housecoat. We were both looking at the dark stain of ear-blood. I had blown out my eardrum while trying to be a lady. It was then I wondered if being a “lady” was worth it.

And now here was Beth Anne, a lady, come to take my chicken.

Cliff’s Adam’s apple bobs once more. Looking like he’s decided something he licks his lips, puts his cap firmly on his head, and says, “Tell Mr. Summers we’ll be out in a moment. I found a sore on Lady,... uh, the chicken’s foot. I wanted Cassidy to take a look at it.”

Warning flashes across Beth Anne's perfect face. "A sore? What kind of a sore?" She hates disease of any kind. Weak stomach and all that. Very lady-like.

Cliff shrugs his shoulders and stuffs his hands in the pockets of his overalls. "Not sure, but it didn't look right, and seeing as she's one of Cassidy's flock," he nods to me, "I thought she ought to have a look. She'd know better than anyone else if the hen was alright."

"Huh," *snort*, "ain't that the truth."

*Did Beth Anne just snort?*

"Let Mr. Summers know we'll be right out, Beth Anne." He's direct. Very direct. Even though he's a year older than Beth Anne he has never spoken like that before.

Beth Anne looks confused and a bit fishy, like the trout when they first come out of the water. Cliff had dismissed her - school-teacher dismissed her. She makes a few strange attempts at sounds, then turns to leave. She looks back just once, a curious look on her face.

"Did, did you really find a sore on her foot?" My head tilts down trying to examine Lady Grey's claw. She curls it tight, not liking the angle I've got her at.

Cliff smirks and shrugs his shoulders. His eyebrows dance. I can't help but smile in return. He winks. We share a secret now.

Whether he had or not was of no consequence. It's a momentary reprieve, but we have to face the music, Lady Grey and me. We have to face Granddaddy and the job to be done.

I square my shoulders and feel Lady Grey do the same with her little breast. She lifts her head like the short-lived queen she is destined to be. The two of us channeling our inner strength and our inner ancestors, although I wish her ancestors hadn't had such a track record with the chopping block.

We walk across the barnyard. The animals drop their heads in reverence as they snuffle the ground for food.

We near Granddaddy's penned-in work area. There is a large section of last spring's oak centered in the pen, wide and flat on top. It's clean, a new log for a new season. Granddaddy sharpens the hatchet then rests it against the wall of the shed. A sharpening of mercy. I recall how King Henry asked the executioner to do the same before his *first* beloved Anne was beheaded. For the life of me I can't remember if he did the same for the others.

Cliff opens the gate of the pen for us, a slight squeak as it swings out. The sound stops me. I am hesitant to cross. It's the waiting log before me, and the sawdust laid down around it. It smells different. Ready.

Lady Grey tenses. Her little chicken eyes start blink-blinking, her head quirking this way and that to get in the view. Her neck presses back and her feet start pawing at the air, pushing, pushing away. She knows this place.

I tighten my grip around her, step forward, trained. I have done this before. Quick is best, for everyone.

I cross the threshold and stand before Granddaddy. He nods to me, holds out his hands to receive.

I steal myself to hand over my chicken, bracing like I did with that sneeze. Things are rising. I swallow them down, steady my breath, and.....

I can't do it. My arms freeze half-way.

Lady Grey begins squirming in earnest, legs running in the air. Her neck starts twisting, wings straining against my hands. She no longer wants to play along. She is full-out struggling.

We act as one, my Lady Grey and I. I throw her up and she flies. She spreads her wings and flaps for all she's worth. Over Granddaddy's head, over the opposite side of the pen, wings beating over half of the empty paddock. Feathers and hen dust filling the air in twenty beautiful seconds of chicken flight.

She lands awkwardly on her gimpy foot, squawks and wobble-runs her way to the end of the paddock, hops up to the top rail, misses, and crawls under instead, her good foot leading.

She does not look back.

Within moments her little chicken brain is tilting this way and that just like her head. She scratches and starts pecking the ground for bugs like nothing ever happened.

I hear Cliff clear his throat behind me as the stinging warning of tears closes mine. I try to steady my face, keep it impassive; I am a farmer after all. I have done this plenty of times, it's a completely natural part of the life process, but this time I couldn't do it. I let my granddaddy down.

I sniffle and snuffle, and cough and choke a bit on my own snot.

"Mr. Summers, sir?"

I can feel Granddaddy's eyes leave me. I can't look at him. Not yet. I hear him scratch his head, disturbing the few sweaty hairs that are still there.

"I was wondering if, well, sir, if, it had to be this particular chicken. Today. Could we possibly make an exchange?" I chance a look at Cliff. He's standing tall. They are the same height. I hadn't noticed before.

When Granddaddy starts his thinking Cliff winks at me. My heart tumbles with hope and something else.

Granddaddy pulls at his chin the way seasoned farmers do. He squints and looks off in the distance. Then he rubs under his chin like I do with the barn cats, keeps that sun-bright look to his eye. I hear the stubble sing across the tops of his fingers. He's considerin', deep considerin'.

I snuffle once more, not really meaning to. I feel blotchy. I am sure I am all blotchy. Cliff looks at me, not the way he looked at Beth Anne, but I feel warm all the same. He smiles. Another heart tumbler. A slight movement of that eyebrow, another secret. No one I know can move eyebrows that way. He says to Granddaddy, "Sir, I'd like to buy that chicken off'n you."

Granddaddy's thinkin', a slow-farmer thinkin'. He knows his answer, Cliff knows his answer, even I know his answer, but we go through the motions anyway. He rolls his lips over his teeth, making sounds like he's chewing tobacco, even though he's not. We wait.

He offers his hand to Cliff, "Deal."

"You can take it out of my wages, sir."

"That I'll do son, that I'll do," and he claps Cliff friendly-like on the back, shaking his hand again. The two move towards the barn. "Now let's go see about that hay wagon."

"Cassidy," Granddaddy turns and almost steps on me 'cause I'm following where I shouldn't be. "Go and put your Lady Grey back. And tell Beth Anne to get that laundry off'n the line before a bird poops on it. Your grandma can't be doing everything around here."

I look from Granddaddy to Lady Grey, pecking away on the other side of the paddock.

"Go, before I change my mind." He doesn't need to tell me twice. "And Cassidy?" he continues in a whisper. "Learn your history. Don't go courting disaster by naming animals after people who were executed or generals who died doing stupid things in battle." A brief memory of Colonel Custer, last year's spring pig, flashes through my mind.

He ruffles my already rumpled head.

“Thank-you, Granddaddy.”

“Don’t thank me, it’s Cliff you’ve got to thank.”

Lady Grey is not as trusting as she was before. I usher her back toward the henyard, which is no easy task. She has a short memory, but her sense of smell is strong, and to her I still smell of fresh sawdust from *the* area. When I redirect her she squawks back at me and sends out her defense wings.

At the barnyard the other hens gather her in, welcome her back, all except Elizabeth, ever the Princess. As the others chuck Lady Grey on the head and bump her gently with their bodies, Elizabeth comes flapping across the yard. “Order, order!” she seems to scream. “My place, my place! Everyone in *their* place!”

I let them be, my fine flock of hens. Lady Grey would be okay, and thanks to Cliff she would now live a long, happy hen-pecked life.

Granddaddy steps out the other end of the barn just before I come in. I pause before entering. I want to say thank-you to Cliff. Alone. I bite the tip of my thumb to settle the shakiness I feel all the way down in my gut. It’s all flippy-floppy again.

I step in, let my eyes adjust to dark barn light. Cliff is working on the hayrake. He looks up. My entrances are forever loud. “Hey, Cassaday. You put your chick – er, uh... You get your Lady Grey all settled in?” He moves around to the rear of the rake using his rag to clean bolts and put them back. We’d be haying soon.

“I did.” I nod dumbly. I bite the tip of my thumb again and move closer. “Umm, Cliff...”

He looks up, wipes the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and leaves a streak of grease. I want to touch it. “Yeah?”

“I just want to... that is I just want..”

“Cassaday, you okay? You’re looking kind of red. You ain’t got the scarlet fever have you? Do you need to sit down?”

“No, I...,” I shake my head. This is going all wrong. “I just wanted to say...”

“Cass! Cassiday!” Beth Anne’s voice carries straight into the barn and ruins my moment for the second time that day. “There you are, Cass. Grandma needs you in the house. It’s your turn on the butter.”

“And you’re supposed to take the clothes off’n the line!” I nearly shout back at her.

She flinches a bit; Cliff looks more startled. She’s a quick recovery though. “Already done.” She smiles at Cliff and leans against the wall by the hayrake, Marilyn-like. I’ve lost my chance.

“Cliff,” she says before he turns back to his nuts and bolts. “That was an awfully nice thing you did for Cassiday, buying that gimpy little chicken.” She smiles. I can almost believe she is sincere. She crosses her arms under her breasts, and tilts her head. “Why’d you do it?”

Cliff’s grinning and wiping, wiping the inside of a ratchet. He leans down to begin working on the bolts again. “Well, I couldn’t very well leave a lady in distress, now could I?” A little eyebrow lift, just for me. I can’t help it. I grin from ear to ear and rock on my toes.

*Lady. He called me a lady.*

He shrugs his shoulders. “Besides. She’s like my little sister, couldn’t stand to see her hurtin’” he looks back over his shoulder at me. “Cass is one of the best kids I know.” He looks like he’s giving me the greatest compliment in the world and goes back to his tinkering.

I am frozen to the spot. *Kid? Kid? But... you smiled.. at me...*

I must have paled because Beth Anne, of all people, pushes off the wall, is by my side in an instant. My knees start to give way.

“Maybe we best get you inside. You’ve had enough of a shock for one day.”

I nod numbly. Cliff turns toward us, confused. He steps forward to take my arm, but I pull away. I seize with sneezing. Going past my usual three I don’t stop until five.

“Cassaday, you okay kid?” He’s peering down at me, brows furrowed, eyes alight with worry. His palm is warm on my shoulder as he scans my face. I can see the pale stubble on his chin and upper lip, beads of sweat making it all moist. His breath is sweet, like hay.

For a moment I think I understand King Henry. After the loss of each love he ripped her name and symbols out of every tapestry, piece of fabric, and carving. Silly man. Each time he interwove their names with his own.

I shake my head in response to his question. I can’t look at him. I just can’t look at him. My insides feel like they’re being sliced, and his hand is slow December fire, warming and painful at the same time.

His voice is full of worry as he speaks to Beth Anne. “She alright? What happened?”

*He’s so clueless. That hurts the worst.*

“Nothing,” says Beth Anne.

She’s right. Absolutely nothing happened.

Beth Anne walks me out of the barn. Her arm around my shoulder she says, “I’m sorry, Cassaday,” in a much softer way than she ever has before. She doesn’t say he is too old, she doesn’t say he is a fool, doesn’t say this will pass, just I’m sorry. Maybe a lady understands more than I think.

I lean into her shoulder, like a sapling from the wind, and cry the tears I should have cried for Grey.