

An excerpt from "The Harvest" by Charlene Finn

The Harvest

On the day Anna's granddaughter Skye was due to fly into Kalispell, Anna's picking crew arrived before sunup, ready to harvest the Bings. Waiting at the airport, Anna wondered if she'd even remember her granddaughter or if her daughter Maggie's mumblings about Skye being the only one in the heat of June wearing all black would be enough for Anna to recognize the teenager she hadn't seen since Skye was nine.

It wasn't Skye's black hair, defiantly auburn along the knife-edge part, or even her baby doll dress or black army boots that gave her away as much as it was her grandfather Frank's agate-blue eyes standing out against all that milky skin.

Skye hitched her duffel over her shoulder and Anna hugged her when they got close enough.

"You smell nice," Anna said.

"Mmm." Skye let her bag slump to the floor. "I want you to meet Luke."

"Mrs. Dern." A young man in jeans shredded at the heel thrust his hand at Anna. "Thanks for letting me visit."

Anna pulled away. "I didn't tell your mother I'd take on any more kids than you, Skye." What she had told her daughter was that on one condition would she have Skye—if she'd help harvest the cherries.

"I'm stopping over on my way to see my mother," Luke said. "In Chicago."

The boy's jarring good looks in throw-away clothes perplexed Anna. "Wood's Bay is nowhere near Chicago."

"Let him stay, Grammy. We'll help you."

Anna sighed. "I don't need a house full of company when I'm harvesting the cherries. I never done it, you know. Your Grandpa did." Frank never expected her to know a thing about hiring or picking the cherries.

"Runnin' crew ain't no work for you, Anna," Frank had said. "Stick with what you know."

"How's your mother?" Anna asked, ignoring Luke.

"Fine," Skye said.

Anna knew about Maggie, Skye's mother. Maggie had said, "What do you mean you hired a different foreman, Mother? Daddy always hired Rodriguez to run the crew." Anna thought maybe Maggie had sent Skye to keep an eye on her.

Anna cranked the window on the old Cadillac. "You too hot?" she asked the kids. "This car is the first with air your grandpa ever bought."

"I don't like that canned air," Skye said. "Mom's got it."

Anna fully unrolled the window. She didn't care for the air conditioner either. In the mirror, she noticed how Luke was teasing Skye, his mouth on her ear, making her smile, even as Skye watched Anna's reflection in the rear view mirror.

"Flathead Lake is there," Anna snapped, pointing. "We're thirty miles from Woods Bay." What had she agreed to? But two days were just that—then this Luke would be on his way, and her foreman, Jake, would have gotten two days worth of cherries off the trees and to the packing sheds. She accelerated, no longer caring about the scenery. She had a crop to harvest, kids or no kids.

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The brush pile on the sled had gotten too high. "Wait," Anna said, removing branches. Skye's driving would pitch off half they'd put on.

Skye scowled; her hair was plastered to her neck; sweat streaked through the dirt. "Why are you undoing our work?"

"Better take what we have. You're just learning. If the loads too big, we'll drop it."

Skye dropped the sticks. "I get to drive, then?"

"Hope you can," Anna said, watching Skye high-step up to the tractor. Skye swiggled her butt forward on the seat. "Go on. Start it."

Anna climbed onto the tractor's hitch and listened to the whiny sound of Skye's timid twist of the key. "Try again. More gas, maybe."

Skye pressed her foot down on the throttle, jaggled the shifting knob, and gave the key another turn. After a momentary hesitation, the engine caught. As soon as Skye tried to move forward though, the engine died. She

tried again, grinding the gears as she forced the stick into first. The tractor jack-rabbed forward, rattling teeth and metal, then died.

Skye turned back to look at Anna with her blue eyes, and for a moment swimmy with defeat.

"You know, last night..."

"Yeah." Anna would get her thank you now.

"I didn't ask for help, Grammy. I can take care of myself."

Anna tensed. Last night rage swooped up her body and swamped her brain. "He was hurting you. He forced you."

"How do you know?"

Anna grabbed onto the fender. She had a right to what she knew. "I was there. Remember. I saw."

"You can't know what goes on between two people." Skye twisted the key again. The engine raced then slid into a throaty idle. Skye sat nearly motionless on the wide iron tractor seat; only her shoulders trembled.

Anna looked up through the long branches heavy with cherries, for a patch of sky. She closed her eyes and felt the engine's vibrations travel through the fenders, through her roughened hands, the long bones in her arms, to her collar bone, her breast bone, down her spine and up, until her skull jangled with the rumble of the motor.

She opened her eyes, remembering the shock of an unyielding floor, or wall, or bed, against her back. "No, please," her yielding, letting be, over and over. Her shame; Frank's hungry bitter words, "you can't...you must," reverberated in her memory, through every cell, like vibrations freed until they blew something apart.

"Just make the tractor go." Anna snapped.

"I can't. I really can't. You have to." Skye stood up. "You do it, Grammy. You."

"I don't remember." How much easier for Skye to try again. Anna looked at her granddaughter's face: her blue eyes no longer daring, her mouth slack with failure.

She couldn't ask Skye to try when she herself had never risked doing for herself.

Anna slipped into the seat and took the wheel in both hands. She flexed her fingers around the wheel, remembering a time before Frank, when her Daddy taught her to drive: how much play there was in the wheel. A forgiveness in turning too slowly or too quickly, for mis-judging a blind corner. Too much she had forgotten.

She depressed the clutch. No resistance until halfway to the floor and then she knew she had to let it out steady, with control. "When you try again, let the clutch out slower." The tractor moved tentatively ahead. "Is the brush holding back there?"

"It's holding."

Anna sped up a little, navigating between the trees, careful not to clip any of the branches weighted with cherries, or knock off the unwieldy bramble of deadwood they carried. They traveled slower than a man could walk.

Then she saw her garden. She slipped the tractor into neutral. "I guess I remember something of driving. I can show you. Here. Sit in my lap."

Skye hesitated.

"You'll like it, once you get the hang of it. You can do all the driving."

Skye climbed over Anna's legs and balanced on the edge of the seat, her hands on the wheel.

With her nearly grown granddaughter sitting between her knees, Anna whispered into Skye's ear. "Now, feel the clutch, where it catches. Feel that place of tension that allows for the change, from neutral to forward. You can't rush by it, can't pop the clutch or—see?—the engine dies."

Skye started the engine again and slowly, slower than baby steps, she released the clutch and eased the tractor ahead.

Anna held her breath. Closed her eyes. Exhaled.

As brief as she knew it would be, she wanted nothing more than to keep her arms around her granddaughter.