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Grand Opening

Written by Claire Parker

Illustrated by Susan Robinson-Cloete

Appalachia was lush in the summer. The cicadas sang at sunrise, bears rambled freely in the foliage, and flaming azaleas prospered. The grassy meadow in front of Henry Burrows seemed to whisper to him; an imperceptible beat that sent shivers down his back even though the midday heat was almost unbearable. Henry wiped the uncomfortable thought and sweat away from his brow and turned to his associate.

"This seems like as good a place as any."

"Of course, sir," William said as he jotted down notes. "Should we get the photos for the press?"

Henry looked back at the meadow opening. A gleaming white building. Massive glass windows to let in the sunlight. The roof would have a garden. The Burrows & Co. marketing team would advertise this location as a special green store, the cooled shelves lined with their new 100% Pure Lab™ meat series, crops from the roof at premium prices, and some locally sourced farm produce. Henry could taste the success in the humid air.

He posed for the shot, anticipating the photographer's instructions after so many years. He needed to be seen as approachable to the public. Back in his father's day as the head of

the company, the marketing team had devised a way to make the CEO seem involved in every decision. So here Henry stood, his smiling face the seal of approval for the newest location of the next Burrows & Co. branch. With the new regulations from the Green Shift laws over the past decades, companies were responsible for their own image. Many of their reputations had been damaged by the media spin of "the real truths" about the pollution crisis, so they had to fight back tooth and nail in order to preserve their power. The companies made deals and came up with campaigns announcing their transition to clean energy while still maintaining their economic power. Henry's father had personally championed the switch from coal power in his factories to photovoltaics, and was hailed as an environmental hero. What a legacy to live up to. And here Henry was standing in front of a field for a publicity shot.

The photographer signaled that he was done and Henry let the forced smile drop from his face.

"Do you know when we can break ground, William?" he asked.

"They say they can start as soon as tomorrow. But..." he trailed off, looking away from Henry.

"But what?" he replied irritably.

"There are rumors that a protest against the construction of our new location is planned for whenever the builders arrive."

Henry sighed and rubbed his eyes. This had been happening more and more lately. "Send an authorization to the environmental enforcement squad to come out and guard the grounds. The land has already been purchased, so there is no contest."

"Of course, sir." William paused, as if to add something. Henry looked at him expectantly. William cleared his throat. "It's the old mining coalition. The Black Lungs."

Ah. There were still small pockets of people who were still serving their sustainability sentences in Appalachia. Generations of men and women who had worked in the mines, emerging covered in soot, crimes against the earth mingling with the grime under their nails. Most of them understood they had to serve their time as environmental rehabilitators, but some of them, like the Black Lungs, weren't as understanding. The leader of the old mining coalition, an old man whose voice sounded like the gritty coal dust he had corrupted the air with, claimed that companies like Burrows & Co. had taken their livelihoods away when the mines shut down, and that they deserved reparations for the harm the coal caused their bodies. One day, he thought icily, they'll get what they deserve.

"I'll be there personally tomorrow, William. We cannot afford to lose profits because of some group of radicals."

Henry wanted to make an entrance. Appearances were everything, and arriving as the peacemaker to an ugly brawl between a group of radicals and a company trying to provide resources to a dwindling community would only boost Burrows and Co.'s public image. Lost in thought, he pulled over to the construction site. He snapped back to reality, and he fumbled with his seatbelt as he flung open the door.

No equipment was in place, no environmental enforcement officers, no sign of any movement anywhere. Silence. He checked his GPS to make sure he was in the right location. He was. He clenched his jaw. He needed an explanation. William. He thrust his hand in his pocket to grab his phone when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Sir."

"William," he said as he turned, his voice rising. "Where the hell—"

He cut off when he saw the man who stood by William's side. The man had to be at least seventy, but his smoldering eyes beneath his hardened brow sent a jolt of recognition through Henry. Those eyes stared out from wanted posters, from every hijacked mandatory sustainability sentencing update broadcast the government televised. But there was more. Side by side, Henry connected the physical similarities, for this man's eyes hadn't just stared out at him from a wanted poster. He met William's piercing gaze.

"Mr. Burrows," William said casually, "allow me to introduce you to my father, Gilbert Carson."

"Ye can call me Gil, Henry." The man stuck out his hand and Henry recoiled. Gil's arm glinted in the morning light, metal from the shoulder down. He saw Henry's stricken expression and

gave a gravelly chuckle. "An old mining accident from my youth. My wife, Hilly, fixed it up for me after we got sentenced. Ain't she a beaut?"

Henry regained his composure. "So, what is going on here?" he said diplomatically.

William exchanged a glance with Gil. The laughter left Gil's eyes, the burning embers returning.

"Well, son, it seems like there's been a misunderstanding between us Black Lungs and the Burrows family."

"A misunderstanding," Henry scoffed.

"You see," Gil began walking and motioned for his son and Henry to follow, "us coal miners got the short end of the stick when people like your father came on the scene during the Green Shift. We got slapped with these sustainability sentences while all we were trying to do was make a living wage. Now you green financiers think you can put all the blame on us."

Gil stopped abruptly and turned to face Henry. "Surely, you can see why we're upset."

"Yet, you didn't find a different job. No one was forcing you and your family to stay, Gil."

"And no one was forcing you into your father's throne, yet here you sit, all golden and tarnished."

Henry opened his mouth to retort, but William interrupted him. "I've worked for you for years, Burrows, and I've yet to see any meaningful action on your part. You use clean energy for your stores, spew nonsense about how everyone deserves healthy, sustainable food and clean water, yet you hike up the prices of the locally sourced produce people could sell to each other. You rerouted the streams we depend on for fresh water to your stores and sell it by tap there. You have a damn monopoly on our necessities, Burrows."

"The economy needs people like me. If it weren't for Burrows & Co., the whole country would be stuck in a rut, no money flowing in or out. We helped build the world back up better than it was before. Fossil fuels are a thing of the past, no thanks to people like you."

"We had to work for our own demise, while you profited off of it." William's face hardened. "The time has come to make a larger statement. People need to know who you really are, Henry Burrows."

Gil stomped his foot against the dirt of the field twice, and Henry heard a distant rumbling. A beat. A shiver went down his spine. A nearby tree gave a sudden burst of light as a long antenna extended from the top of its canopy.

"What's happening?" Henry stuttered out.

"We have all the documents. Every transaction, every conversation, every decision from the past 40 years that shows all the ways you have blamed people like us coal miners for your misdeeds." William took a small, black box out of his pocket and flipped it open. Henry watched with a morbid curiosity as William's thumb hovered over the singular green button.

"And we are sending it out around the globe. People deserve to know. People deserve to live freely, without judgement for a fault that isn't theirs. We aren't the problem."

"I trusted you, William."

"And we all put our trust in you."

Then William pressed the button.