

## The Man Of the House

I ambled down the long, wooded trail, carrying my heavy heart with me. There wasn't a square foot of those woods I didn't know as well as I knew my room. I walked it almost every day, sometimes alone, but usually with my dad. I was born in the house that sat at the front of the thirty-acre spread. As I walked, I looked side to side on the chance something might have changed since the last time I was there. Occasionally, I longed for adventure, but more often I was content when things remained calm. Something was different today. I wasn't sure what it was.

My dad was very sick. A few days ago, he had called me to his side, patted the bed, and asked me to sit beside him. "George" he began with a faint voice. "I don't want to leave you, but it's almost time for me to go. You are the man of the house now. I trust you to take care of your mom." Those words were all he had enough strength for. He pulled his blanket up a bit, straightened his pillow and dozed back off to sleep. For the next few days, those words stayed on my mind.

Suddenly, there it was, on the ground, right in front of me: the most beautiful cobalt bottle I had ever seen, with a cork in it. If I had taken one more step, I would have tripped over it. I carefully picked it up and tried to remove the cork, but to no avail. I could see a piece of rolled paper inside it. I hurried home, hoping Mom could help me.

When I got home, there were several cars in the yard. I recognized all of them. The people went to church with Mom and Dad. Mom was sitting on the sofa when I walked into the room, and I noticed she was crying. It finally hit me full force; Dad was gone. I didn't know where or why, but I knew he was gone. The sadness was overwhelming. I couldn't imagine what life would be like without him. For my entire life, he had been my strength, mentor and best friend. How could I go on alone? How would I learn to be a man without his guidance? The words he had said to me only a few days ago played through my mind again; "*You are the man of the house now. I trust you to take care of your mom.*"

Mom turned and twisted the bottle in her hands, and eventually she removed the cork. She turned the bottle up and let the paper slide out into her hand. She unrolled it and read aloud;

*My darling Melinda, some time back, I realized our time together was going to be short, but I didn't want to talk to you about it. I didn't want to make you sad. I know you won't be able to keep the home with the small amount of money you will have. I talked with the realtor in town, and he will be expecting your call. I have also talked with George and asked him to take care of you. I know without a doubt he will do that, because he loves you very much. Goodbye my love. I know I will see you again soon.*

A few days later, the wonderful people from the church came up with a plan. They knew one of Mom's special talents was making flower arrangements. They built a shed beside our house and stocked it with all of the supplies needed for her new career. People have come from near and far to buy her masterpieces, and she has been able to keep the house.

Dad was an intelligent man. He knew encouraging words can mean so much to someone, even a dog. Today, I am a beautiful, ninety-six-pound Doberman. I have taken care of Mom and protected her. I have never been forced to be aggressive, but I have shown a few people I would do whatever necessary to protect her. I don't need words, and I don't need to use my teeth. All I need to do is show them.

I kept the cobalt bottle, and it still holds the message from my dad. Every time I look at it, I am reminded of the encouraging words he gave me, and how they have helped me grow up, tall and proud.