

Chapter One



*Lavender Meadows
Medford, Oregon*

“We did it! We did it!”

Andy Taylor threw the purchase order in the air, leaped from her chair, and whirlwind dance-stepped around the workshop barn of Lavender Meadows. “We finally made it.” She switched from shouting to singing, making up words as she went. “We’re in the money. From now on every day will be sunny. Give lavender sachets to your honey. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.”

After two turns around the twenty-by-twenty workspace, Andy stopped, caught her breath, then retrieved the purchase order from the plank floor where it had landed. Her hands trembled as she read it again, this time committing each word to memory, beginning with the Nordstrom store letterhead. When she got to the signature, she squealed in delight. She hadn’t imagined it. It was real. Mike Johnson, the head buyer, wanted the entire line of lavender-based products: soaps, hand and body lotions, sachets, tea—even the cookbook—for all his California stores.

Andy sank into the closest chair and stared at the paper. She felt

tears gather in her eyes. All the hard work was finally starting to pay off. It had been a long, hard transition from the apple and pear orchards, which had been her parents' livelihood until the competition had beaten them out, to the fields of lavender, which had no competition at all because nobody thought it was a crop worth growing.

She focused on the quantity column and whistled. This was just the beginning. She knew how retail worked. Once the products were in the store and the other chains got wind of them, there would be calls from other buyers and more orders. Now that was the kind of competition she welcomed.

She tried to mentally calculate the profit on this first order. Numbers flashed in front of her eyes like a calculator gone berserk. She would have to put pencil to paper, but she was sure there would be enough profit to stash a few thousand into her parents' retirement account as well as to buy or lease the equipment she needed to produce essential oil of lavender.

Andy wrapped her arms around her middle and squeezed herself. She could hardly wait to give her parents the good news.

From the day she'd begged them to become her business partners, telling them that she really needed their experience and help, they had been behind her with encouragement and support. If they had ever seen through her intentions, they never let on.

She wished her husband was half as encouraging and supportive as her parents. He loved her and admired her, of that she had no doubt. He often told her she had "many fine qualities." But as far as he was concerned, Lavender Meadows was and always would be just a "nice little hobby." Why last year's balance sheet hadn't made him see Lavender Meadows' potential, she didn't know, but surely this order would wake him up, make him see now what the rest of them saw.

Andy's thoughts raced. Martin. How would she tell him? What would she say? "Dear, I have something to tell you." She shook her

head. Not enough punch. "Martin, I think you should sit down." Scratch that. Too dramatic. "Martin, you know how you've always called Lavender Meadows my *little hobby*?" She mentally handed him the purchase order and imagined his eyes widening and the corners of his mouth teasing into a smile.

"Andy, dear, where are you?" Her mother's voice came from the walk between the house and the barn.

Martin's stunned face faded into nothingness. While the idea of flaunting the order in his face was fun to think about, she would never do it. Not in a million years. Instead, she would tell him the news via e-mail, with words carefully chosen so they wouldn't sound like she was saying, "I told you so."

"In here," Andy called back, putting Martin to the back of her mind. She knew her mother always stopped at the sundial garden where the flagstone path divided in a Y, one arm to Andy's house, the other to the refurbished barn-turned-studio, office, production, and shipping center. A half-dozen roses surrounded the sundial, the only roses on the farm. Her mother's favorite was the tea rose named Double Delight. It had a creamy center with petals tipped with the pinks and reds of a brilliant sunrise. She didn't have to see her mother to know she was bending over and inhaling the rose's potent fragrance.

"That rose is blooming more this year than ever before," Alice said from the doorway, where she paused until her eyes could adjust. Ever since her cataract surgery, she was more careful about going from the bright daylight into the dimness of the refurbished barn. At length she moved away from the door, walking as gracefully as she had twenty years ago. It was all in her posture, Andy reminded herself, a posture her mother had learned and practiced faithfully throughout her years as a dancer.

"You say that every year."

"I know, but here it is September, and the meadows are covered

with blossoms.” Alice closed her eyes and sniffed the air. “Between roses and lavender, I always feel like I’m on a scent-sational high.”

Andy smiled at her mother’s unique use of their advertising slogan. “Clever. Very clever.”

“Yes, I thought so too,” Alice said with a laugh.

In years past, Andy and her mother had more than once been accused of being sisters, not only because they sounded so much alike but also because they looked alike, with straight hair cut just below their ears, broad brows, strong chins, and clear hazel eyes.

Once Andy had turned fifty, however, she refused to let her hair show any gray, and she always plucked her eyebrows to some semblance of order.

Andy could barely contain her excitement, but she’d decided to wait for the right moment to give her mother the good news. She wanted that moment to be one they would both savor for years to come. “You always make me feel good,” she said instead.

Alice picked up the raffia-tied clump of lavender on her work-table. “Why, thank you. What a nice compliment.”

Something I don’t do often enough. Andy promised to rectify that failing and held out the purchase order. “I got a fax a few minutes ago from a new customer. It’s the biggest order we’ve had yet.” Andy handed her mother the purchase order and watched her read it.

Alice’s face underwent a series of expressions: disbelief, shock, and finally jubilation. “This is— Oh, my. This is wonderful, I mean fabulous, I mean— Oh, honey.” She glanced up, her eyes sparkling. Clearly, she was incapable of expressing herself further.

“This is just the beginning, Mom. Just the beginning.” Andy surged to her feet and flung herself into her mother’s arms. “We’re a team, Mom. You, me, and Dad.” She glanced around the workshop: bunches of drying lavender hanging from the lattice attached by chains to the aging beams, dried lavender blossoms piled in bins, toiletries

and sachets displayed on a table. Cubbyholes with various sizes of plastic bags lined the wall above the worktable, where she and her father, Walt, spent hours preparing the various products for shipping.

Alice pulled back, concern wrinkling her brow. "Do we have enough product on hand for an order this size?"

Andy nodded. "It'll be tight, but we'll make it."

Alice breathed a sigh of relief, but the look of concern stayed with her. A moment later she asked, half under her breath, "Have you told Martin?"

Andy knew what her mother was thinking, the same thing Andy had been thinking a few minutes ago. "No. I'll e-mail him tonight after dinner. I'm sure he's in a meeting right now and wouldn't appreciate being interrupted." Martin, her husband of thirty-two years, spent all his afternoons in meetings, selling product for Advanced Electronic Systems, or AES as it was commonly known. When he wasn't in a meeting, he was on the road traveling to the next meeting. It was a never-ending cycle that had kept him absent from their home most of their married life. Andy had learned to cope because travel was what Martin did, what he'd always done. She contented herself with having him home at least two weekends a month, and she planned her schedule accordingly.

Alice laid the purchase order down on the worktable. "If we get any more orders like this, we'll have to hire more help."

"What do you mean *if*?"

"Don't be too cocky now," her mother warned, then turned toward the window that looked out over the south field. She had a faraway look in her eyes. "Who'd have thought that that lavender sachet I gave you way back when would come to...this?" She looked over her shoulder at her daughter. "You were right on, honey. About everything."

"I did a lot of praying, Mom."

“Well, it looks like your prayers and ours have been answered.” Alice glanced heavenward, then turned back to Andy.

Now it was Andy’s turn to gaze out the window. The south field, three acres lovingly planted with French lavender and cared for solely by her father, was the newest. Andy knew she’d inherited her love of growing things from her father and her love of cooking from her mother. From both of them came her love of Medford, Oregon, where she’d grown up and where she’d learned her faith at her parents’ sides.

As newlyweds, she and Martin had purchased a corner of the family farm, making them the third generation to live on the land, and their three children, the fourth. Andy had insisted that they build the house close to her grandfather’s old milking barn so the children could have all the animals their hearts desired. Over the decades, the barn had served as a home for her grandfather’s milk cows, then as a shelter for the kids’ beef cattle, sheep, and barn cats, and now as the center of business for Lavender Meadows.

“You know, it’s funny,” Alice said. “Your dad and I were talking over lunch about working up that stretch of pasture behind the barn. Do we have enough starts for that?”

Andy mentally counted her nursery rows of lavender cuttings rooted in four-inch plastic pots. “No, but it’s not a problem. I’ll have to order some Hidcote from one of the other nurseries.” She raised her hands over her head in a stretch and inhaled the fragrance of lavender, underlain with old barn scents of hay, cattle, and manure.

With the excitement over, at least for the moment, Alice flipped through the in-box, looking through the rest of the mail. She pulled out a sheaf of paper-clipped order forms and laid them out on the worktable. “My goodness. That last ad we put in the *Rogue Valley News* has really paid off. There must be thirty orders here.”

“I ran another one in the classifieds for this weekend, and now I

wish I hadn't," Andy said. "Martin e-mailed and said that he has a long weekend at home and that I should plan something, but..."

"Dad and I can handle things here," Alice volunteered as she always did.

"Are you sure? That would be great." Andy turned her thoughts to the weekend ahead. "I wonder what he'd like to do. He always says that when he's home, he just wants to be home, but I'd sure like to go out to dinner on Saturday night. Maybe we could even take in a movie. I'll have to check what's playing."

Alice sat down and began to make order of the paperwork. "Have you heard from Morgan?"

"She's homesick. That hasn't changed. You'd think that she'd be thrilled to be there, what with all the years she dreamed of following in Bria's and Cam's footsteps in the hallowed halls of Pacific Lutheran University."

"Being happy to be someplace has no bearing on homesickness. I remember the first year you went to Bible camp." Alice chuckled softly.

Andy heard her mother's soft laughter and pretended an indignation she was far from feeling. "Mother, I was only eight. Besides all our family vacations, Morgan's been to 4-H camp, to Bible camp, and to Washington DC with her senior class, and she stayed with Bria in Seattle. I didn't really expect this of her."

"Just because three children are reared in the same family doesn't mean they will be anything like each other." Finished with her sorting, Alice picked up a one-pound plastic bag and set it on the digital scale.

"You don't need to weigh every one of those."

"I know. Just checking to make sure the machine is working right."

Andy's father had invented a machine, similar to a grocery store coffee grinder, with a dial that could be set to release dried lavender

by ounces or pounds. One needed only to hold a bag under the spout, press the foot pedal, and wait until the bag was full. Both Andy and her mother had tried to talk him into patenting the invention, but he said it really wasn't that ingenious.

Andy noted how efficiently her mother worked. How good it was when parents and children could work together and still remain best friends. Not for the first time, Andy thought about how much she was like her mother. Besides looking like sisters, they had similar work ethics and morals. There was one similarity, however, that Andy wished were different. Both of them had given up promising careers for love. Alice had been the lead female dancer in a prestigious dance troupe in Los Angeles, and Andy had been halfway up the corporate ladder in a clothing store chain.

Sadly, the only dancing Alice had done since her wedding day was at church socials and the occasional evening out on the town. Until a couple of years ago, Andy had thought her own talent as a businesswoman would be wasted as well. For thirty-two years there hadn't been much to apply it to, other than comparing rates for insurance companies and long-distance phone carriers. With extra time of her own, once the older children had started off to college, she found herself working outside more. She'd always loved lavender, and before she knew it, she had herself a lavender garden. One thing led to another, and soon the lavender blossoms were finding their way into her bath, under her pillow, and even into her cooking.

The making of lavender products for sale had seemed a natural transition, although she hadn't anticipated such a big demand. And what a delightful surprise that her "little hobby" had grown into a thriving home-based business.

When she accidentally stumbled across her parents' Merrill Lynch statement and saw that they had lost more than half of their retirement savings in bad stocks and wouldn't have enough to see them

through their golden years, she knew she would have to do something to help them get back their nest egg. She prayed for a solution that would give them the money they needed without hurting their pride.

"You want to help me with the lavender wands?" Her mother's voice broke into her thoughts.

The woven lavender wands were her personal favorite. "Sure." Though the most labor-intensive of all their products, the ribbon-laced wands were also their bestsellers. The week before, Andy had offered two different classes in making them, but more people were still on the waiting list, eager for her call. "Hey, Mom, you want to teach the next round of classes?"

Alice snorted loudly. "No! I'll do whatever you need, except teach. You know that."

"Never hurts to ask." Andy shrugged and turned to the ringing phone. "Lavender Meadows. This is Andy. May I help you?" Picking up a pen, she poised it over a blank invoice. "I can ship that out FedEx tomorrow." She jotted down the customer's name, mailing address, and credit-card information. "May I ask how you heard about us?" She smiled when she heard the source. "Thank you for calling." She hung up and put the invoice in the in-box, then turned to her mother. "Word of mouth. The best advertising ever. Thank You, Lord." She glanced heavenward, as if adding an *amen* to her praise. "Is Dad at the house?"

In the midst of making a wand, Alice answered without taking her eyes off her work. "I think so. He was fixing the leak under the bathroom sink when I left."

"Ow! That probably means he's going to be in a bad mood all night." Plumbing was not her father's favorite thing.

"Probably. But once the blue smoke clears, he'll be fine again."

"I want to tell him our news and ask how soon he wants to start digging holes." She picked up the phone again and dialed her parents'

number. She waited until the answering machine was ready to click on, then hung up. "He must be outside."

"Or still under the sink."

"I hope not." Andy gave a shudder that made them both smile. "You should have hired a plumber."

"He refused. He said there was no reason to pay fifty dollars for a plumber to do what he could do for free. Then he went out to the garage for his wrenches, and that was that."

Andy laughed. "I guess I don't have to wonder where I got my stubbornness, do I?"

That evening, after she and her mother had closed up shop, Andy went around the side of the barn to the lean-to that served as the chicken house and put the "girls" to bed. The evening ritual of counting hens and closing the door prevented marauding skunks and foxes from raiding the henhouse. Andy had raised chickens since she was in preschool. She had never eaten store-bought eggs, and she refused to start at her advanced age of fifty-two. Whistling for her dog, Comet, who was part Border collie and part traveling salesman, she gazed over at the pond. A stately white egret waited there for a last fish to swim near enough for a snack before flying to the trio of tall trees at the end of the lavender fields, where he roosted every night along with other egrets from miles around. Comet bounded over the lavender plants and wriggled her joy at being summoned. With her black ear flopped half forward and her white one standing erect, Comet doggy-grinned up at Andy.

"Good girl." Andy leaned over and rubbed the dog's ears. "Have you been helping Dad with the plumbing?"

More wriggles and a happy yip. The dog was watching the original farmhouse, which was shaded by a hundred-year-old maple. Comet patrolled the entire forty acres, taking care of both houses and those who lived in them. She and Chai Lai, the Siamese cat who ruled

Andy's house, had developed a truce over the years, growling at each other once in a while to lay to rest any thought that they might have become friends.

"I suppose you're hungry too."

Comet cocked her head up at Andy, her white muzzle and black nose bright in the fading light. If it weren't for her animals and the lavender business that kept her at a dead run, Andy might have been lonesome like her best friend, Shari, who couldn't seem to get out from under the empty-nest pangs and start enjoying herself and her freedom.

Andy headed toward the house, her joy making her steps light. With a few more customers like Nordstrom and steady orders coming in, one of these years Lavender Meadows might be so profitable that Martin would consider leaving his pressure-cooker job and helping her manage it.

A lovely thought, but not very realistic.

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